

In Miami, It's Business for Art's Sake

D.C. Galleries Invest in Fairs for Prime Exposure

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Chances are, Jayme McLellan is sweating.

Like nearly every major -- and minor -- art dealer who pretends to be legit, she is in Miami today, exerting herself for her business. She is chatting up collectors, glad-handing artists and downing cocktails in the name of sales and schmooze. This year, her gallery Civilian Art Projects is participating for the first time in Scope, one of the many art fairs that have sprouted up around Art Basel Miami Beach.

The artathon began five years ago, when Switzerland's Art Basel set up a December event in Miami. That show's popularity generated enough satellite fairs to accommodate an increasing number of galleries. Civilian joins a crop of District galleries that decided 2007 was the year to get a piece.

G Fine Art presents for the first time at the Aqua Wynwood show along with newbies Randall Scott and Meat Market. Project 4 secured an exhibit space at the Aqua Hotel. Hemphill showcases for the first time at the Flow fair on South Beach. D.C. gallery owner Kathleen Ewing travels south to direct the Association of International Photography Art Dealers' inaugural fair. McLellan's gallery has a booth at Scope.

The galleries join early adopters, such as Curator's Office, now in its third year, and Conner Contemporary, which marks its fifth year in Florida.

What's in it for Washington gallerists depends on whom you ask.

"I'll probably see more collectors than I see in a year in my gallery," McLellan says of the exposure promised by the fairs. She hopes Civilian artists will register on the radar of collectors that would never travel to Washington; many of her artists are unknown outside the city.

"Just having my Web site attached to Scope is an amazing marketing tool," McLellan said before she left for the fair. "Already I'm getting e-mails from people wanting to buy just from JPEGs."

Announcements and brochures sent out in the weeks preceding the fair generate hype that can translate into advance sales or, at minimum, reserves on artworks. Leigh Conner, director of Conner Contemporary Art, says she has reserves or sales on half the work in her Miami booth.

"There is an urgency when people know that work is going to a fair," Conner says. "People just don't buy in galleries as much as they used to."

But is the market in South Florida worth 10 grand? That's how much first-timer McLellan estimates she paid to participate in Scope. Her 140-square-foot booth (pint-size by Miami standards) went for \$47 a square foot (cheaper than most). Then there was the flight, the hotel, the car rental, shipping and insuring artwork, per diem and staff fees. Factoring in her artists' commissions, she'll have to sell \$20,000 in art just to break even.

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Even an itinerant gallery like Rody Douzoglou's Douz and Mille has trouble handling the costs. Galleries like Douzoglou's -- virtual selling floors that exist online and in fair booths, with no brick and mortar storefronts -- have taken advantage of the fair system's promise of quick sales with minimum overhead. Yet Douzoglou says that fairs put her in the red.

"I'm losing tons of money by going to the fairs," Douzoglou confided in an e-mail as she considered a trip to the Art Basel in Switzerland held earlier this year. "I actually don't sell as much as I get to promote the artists."

Fair revenues aren't always quantifiable, even for veterans. Connor doesn't consider fair sales and expenses as separate line items; she sees them in a larger context of relationship-building.

"I can see someone at the Pulse fair who will ask about works that they'll buy out of a show [at my gallery] in March," Conner says. "There is no line of demarcation for me."

"I don't see [the fairs] as being an important part of my business as far as generating sales," says Annie Gawlak, director of G Fine Art and veteran of several New York fairs. "I see them as being an important part of getting the gallery known in a larger context."

Dealers cite the opportunity for international exposure as a top reason to participate in Miami. Yet some dealers express discomfort with the proliferation of fairs and the changes they've made in gallery culture.

"It's like going to a big mall," says District photography dealer Ewing. Ewing has decades of experience organizing the Association of International Photography Art Dealers annual New York show each spring. This year, the group bowed to pressure from its membership to exhibit at Miami for the first time. "What's the incentive of coming to a gallery when, for the price of a plane ticket and a hotel room, you can see the world?"

For gallerists like McLellan, the promise of exposure is impossible to ignore.

McLellan can't predict the return on her investment, but odds are beside the point. In this market, McLellan says, "It's a gamble that I thought we had to take."