



May 18, 2007

## CAPITAL ROUNDUP

by Sidney Lawrence

The contemporary art galleries of our nation's capital tend to keep a low profile, dodging the political mainstream the way Tom Sawyer skipped out on Sunday School. But that all changed with artDC, Apr. 27-30, 2007, which brought more than 80 local and international galleries and private dealers, plus 24 museums, art presenters, publications and alternative spaces, into the light at the city's new Convention Center.

Organized by Art Miami director Ilana Vardy, the fair attracted some 10,000 visitors, according to the fair's own count. At \$12 a head in a city of mostly free art museums, you can't help but be impressed. Among the higher-profile visitors spotted strolling the aisles were actress Jane Seymour (an artist herself) and Tony Podesta, the lobbyist and art collector (and brother to John Podesta, Bill Clinton's former chief of staff).

But plenty of others came from all over. One out-of-towner was Brancolini Grimaldi Arte Contemporanea from Florence, which specializes in photography. Highlights included dreamlike c-prints of architecture, like Frank Gehry's Disney Concert Hall, by Olivo Barbieri, and pale yellow and blue photos of crowds on the beach by Massimo Vitali. Works by both artists sold -- Barbieri's work was priced at \$15,000-\$25,000 -- and the gallery is eager to make the trip from Italy again next year.

Baltimore's C. Grimaldis Gallery also looked sharp, particularly with its infinite void minimalist sculptures made with fluorescent lights and mirrors by Korean-born Baltimorean Chul-Hyun Ahn and geometric wall abstractions of grey concrete and rice paper manqué by Annette Sauermann of Aachen, Germany.

Prices at this booth ranged from \$1,250 for a nocturnal photo by young Baltimorean Christopher Saah to \$75,000 for a ledge piece by the late British master sculptor Anthony Caro. Despite a prevalence of "tire-kickers," dealer Constantine Grimaldis reported that three works sold and he remains "optimistic for next year."

Less successful was Galería H & H from Tijuana, a perplexing development, considering the brutal power of the graphic, mixed media works of Ricardo Sander (b. 1976). His stitched-together, ersatz-folk, in-your-face *100% Mexican Beef*, for instance, was priced at only \$1,150. Too edgy for pinstriped politicians with immigration reform on their minds? Perhaps. "Washington apparently does not relate to this kind of work," commented co-owner Petra Herrmann.

Speaking of D.C. stereotypes, Jeff Pyros of Museum Works Galleries, based in Aspen and New York, noted with a chuckle that "customers acted like lawyers -- keen to negotiate, take a day to think things over, explore options, give you a 'callback.'" All the same, four of the six works by the booth's featured artist, post-pop painter and collagist Greg Miller of L.A., were sold, with prices hovering at around \$15,000.

By all accounts, locals loved the fair. Courtly longhair Philip Barlow, a D.C.-government actuary in a suit who collects, curates and keeps a sharp, good-natured eye on the local art world, said that "the fair exceeded all expectations in terms of size, attendance and participation. But what strikes me most is how really, really good the D.C. galleries look in this company." Twenty exhibitors were local, including two from suburban Maryland.

Barlow had a point. From an oozy, organic installation of glass by Graham Caldwell at G Fine Art and a grid of masterful steeple paintings by William Christenberry at George Hemphill to a range of works (some scary, some serene, all good) at such newer galleries as Meat Market, Knew and Project 4, a freshness of vision characterized the art and the hometown's crew professionalism warmed the heart.

Conner Contemporary/Go Go Project's architecture-themed show was cadenced particularly thoughtfully. Works ranged from John Kirchner's photo of a federal building façade stretched into bureaucratic ennui, to Zoe Charleton's funky watercolor of a hot-to-trot black giantess amid cookie-box white-bread suburban houses. Prices ranged from \$350 to \$5,000.

DC's Randall Scott Gallery offered Julia Fullerton-Batten's *Hose* for \$9,000. A winner of the HSBC Foundation Award, Fullerton-Batten has a book in the works and a focus on her "Teenage Stories" series is slated for the next issue of *Culture & Travel*.

Another new kid on the block, Knew Gallery in Georgetown, offered the dizzyingly optical *Game Theory* by John Fasano for \$5,000. Dealer Fernando Batista discovered Fasano's work in 2005 while scouring D.C.'s Corcoran College of Art for his annual November showcase of promising student work. This month, in a first-time effort, his cream-of-the-crop choices are from the Rhode Island School of Design.

Andrea Pollan, who directs D.C.'s Curator's Office, was "delighted" by the fair, making a "more than a reasonable profit" on sales of mostly photo-works, priced at her booth (which may well be larger than the gallery's permanent home) from \$50 to \$7,500. Although the hottest sellers were performance images by the Canadian art team of Nicholas and Sheila Pye and New York nudist impresario Spencer Tunick, Pollan's biggest coup was arranging to have Cliff Evans' *Road to Mount Weather*, a 15-minute projected triptych, on continuous view in artDC's Media Arts section.

Seen last fall at Location One in New York, this "moving wall of paranoia," as the Brooklyn artist calls it, features out-of-control animations that instantly invoke Terry Gilliam's work for *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. But this newer Moebius strip of floating, fluttering, murmuring cut-outs hits you with today's instant news, in full color, as collected from the Internet, rather than modern social satire from Victorian graphics.

Part conspiracy theory, part end of the world, and all LSD, Evans's opus honors a paranoiac's dream, Mount Weather, a forested hill in Virginia that hides an immense underground command center for doomsday. The vid begins with a football game in a "Fed Ex Ground Forces" stadium and ends with Ronald Reagan, in a golden aureole, muttering nonsense in the clouds. In between are snippets of an Abu Ghraib prisoner, Margaret Thatcher, foot soldiers in Iraq, pumping porn, Barack Obama, angels with harps, and on and on and on. Sit back and enjoy the show. For home viewing, this third edition costs you \$9,000.

Assuming the economy holds up, the weather is good, and advance hype hits the right audiences, artDC returns in May 2008, when it could start to evolve a distinct identity as one fair among many of varying sizes, orientations and degrees of hipness now dotting the globe.

**SIDNEY LAWRENCE** is an artist, art critic and curator of "Roger Brown: Southern Exposure," which opens this fall at the Smith Museum in Auburn, Ala., and tours in 2008 to Washington, D.C., and New Orleans.