

THE BIG PICTURE

Inside the city art scene with Catherine Osborne

SHOW BUOYED BY FEVERISH OPTIMISM



Jakub Dolejs's photograph, titled Caspar David Friedrich Sketchin ~ My Homeland, 1818, is a reference to the 19th-century German landscape painter.

Excitement is high at this year's Toronto International Art Fair, where galleries are hoping for big sales

More than 75 contemporary art galleries have set up booths at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre. Each one is showing off its hottest artists, its up-and-comers, its finest examples of blue-chip art. This is the fourth annual Toronto International Art Fair, and by the end of its run on Monday evening an estimated 20,000 people will have viewed more than 3,000 works of art and many millions of dollars will have exchanged hands.

A lot of visitors, collectors even, make this fair their annual venture into the world of contemporary art, though it's well known that art fairs are quite possibly the worst place to look at art. The lighting is bad, the air is dry, the crowds are thick and sluggish by mid-afternoon and good art is displayed alongside the bad on wobbly cubicle walls. It's like Wal-Mart, and for that reason alone it's easy to conclude while walking through the maze that art today has hit a new low, and that it's never looked worse.

Yet for the \$16 admission the range of works is impressive. Galleries seem to have considered every type of buyer, including the kind who'll drop \$58,000 for an enormous 3-D and optically stretched face by Evan Penny (TrépanierBaer Gallery), or \$25,000 for an excellent and rare 1960s bull's eye painting by Montreal abstract artist Claude Tousignant (Galerie Roger Bellemare).

There are also the crowd-pleasers such as Joe Fafard sculptures of cows (Douglas Udell Gallery) and his palomino horses (Susan Whitney Gallery), the hyper-real paintings of kitchen implements and close-ups of fruit by Mary Pratt (Mira Godard Gallery), and the ever-popular reverse-perspective relief paintings of Patrick Hughes (Flowers Gallery), who apparently sells very well in the United States and Europe, too.

Then there are the galleries eager to test the potential market for their next big things. A lot of art here fits that description. In my two-hour walkabout before the fair opened I found plenty of the new new, such as Victoria artist Luanne Martineau's intense pencil cartoon drawings, which her dealer, Yves Trépanier, describes as goofy in a Robert Crumb way and at the same time as elegant as the cloud formations in a Constable sketch (\$1,200 to \$1,400, TrépanierBaer Gallery).

Toronto artist Kim Dorland's paintings are also big value for little dough. Dorland likes to challenge good taste by painting banal images, like a woman vacuuming, then defacing them with a fistful of moist, congealing paint smeared across the middle area. Yours for only \$825 (Angell Gallery).

At Paul Butler's The Other Gallery there are Jean Klimack's paint-by-numbers landscape paintings, which are partially filled in with different-coloured pieces of chewed gum, going for \$400 to \$500.

At the very bottom of the price range I found a series of greeting cards by Fastwurms (among them cards to celebrate Happy Hump Day and Vulture Pride Day). They go for \$5 each at the Paul Petro Contemporary Art booth.

There is definitely a feverish optimism among dealers that this year's fair will be a good one, maybe the best yet. Even dealers from out of town seem convinced the fair has gone legit, it's matured, the organization is better, Toronto has buzz. That could be preview excitement talking. There are in fact fewer international galleries participating than in the past, which suggests the fair is not yet a must for the heavy-hitters around the globe.

The question is, if the big players aren't here, does Toronto have enough collectors to keep the fair going? Canadian galleries outside Toronto say it does. Staff at Edmonton's Douglas Udell Gallery —

which spent \$60,000 in set-up and take-down costs alone — expect to make a quarter of a million dollars in sales by the time they leave. Other galleries are a little more cautious. Sam Chatterton Dickson, who works for Flowers Gallery of New York and London, says that compared to New Yorkers, Toronto buyers are a shyer bunch: We don't open our wallets for any coming to the fair, he's seen a steady growth in clients, but the big sellout has never happened.

The topic of collectors and collecting is the obvious hot button this year. Sideline events include a series of panel discussions by guest speakers who've been flown in to talk about how to go about collecting. People like Martin Z. Margulies, who has amassed a personal collection that fills a warehouse in the Florida Keys. Joel Wachs of the Andy Warhol Foundation is also here to give tips on how to make room for contemporary art in our galleries, museums or maybe just on our living-room walls. There's even a little one-page guide being handed out with how-tos on collecting: "Narrow your focus," it offers. Also, "don't be afraid to ask gallery dealers questions, take notes, don't rush, enjoy the experience." It seems Torontonians are still a bit green at cultural enrichment on a grand scale. This fair is setting itself up to jump-start some action.

■ The Toronto International Art Fair runs until Nov. 17 at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre. General admission is \$16.

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