

Highlight's from Washington DC's (e)merge Art Fair

by P...A...D...D...Y...o...n...S...J...E...O...P...H...T...N...E...S...M...O...B...N...E...R... 2 3 . 2 0 1 1

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Looks like a Miami fair, party doesn't it? The Capital Skyline Hotel, pool party.

While it would be a stretch to call what I saw at the inaugural (e)merge Art Fair good, a lot of the snickering I've witnessed online and off isn't necessary. Whatever the shortcomings fairs may have — we all know they aren't ideal exhibition spaces for art, particularly when they're in hotels — there were many signs that the fair succeeded in building community in a part of the country whose scene could definitely use some help.

Unfortunately, DC is not a particularly exciting place for many artists; many who begin their careers in this city opt to live in hipper cities nearby, Baltimore being a favorite. The scene here is not very developed. As such, an event like (e)merge that in its first run attracts the majority of a field's local participants should — at least on that level — be recognized for its success. Even if exemplary models exist elsewhere, mature scenes don't just arrive fully formed; it takes years of work and a lot of trial and error.

So how was the work at (e)merge? Not that great, though this frankly puts it in line with a lot of other art fairs. So too does the environment: The hotel was packed, elevators were jammed, and the pool area (a trademark of nearly any Miami hotel fair) was full. Still, most other art fairs don't have giant rideable chickens displayed in the basement, which may perhaps excuse my inability to see every lot last night. Surely I can't be expected to simply get on and off that thing and be on my way.



In which I ride a mechanical chicken. Mechanical chicken by Steven Jones

A word of warning: that chicken is dangerous. The four-second delay before the piece starts moving means that — even with a warning label — a rider will be caught by surprise. When I spoke to the artist Steven Jones about the piece, he wondered whether there might be a happy medium between his chicken and his rideable steak,

which he thought might have a gentler feel. I did my best to dissuade him. People need to live on the edge and get on the chicken.



The Idea Store, Double A Projects, Athena Robles and Anna Stein

Aside from this, there was the Idea Store, which literalizes the slogan "penny for your thoughts" by paying contributors a penny and then selling the product for two. While I could do without the baby marketplace lesson, one or two of the ideas tabled weren't bad, my favorite being "Okupid site for wingman (geolocated)". Notably, this project was executed by [Double A Projects](#), a collaborative located in Brooklyn. I'm traveling an awfully long way to see projects that exist in my hood.



Peacock, Sean Nafel and Chris Attenborough, Free Art Booth

Generally speaking, I tended to enjoy the unrepresented artists better than what I saw in the galleries, though I expect at least part of this has to do with my late arrival. Strong exhibition spaces such as Connor Contemporary, ADA Gallery and White Columns all shut their doors at closing time, and those that didn't were generally not that strong.

I also tend to be less annoyed by bad art when people aren't asking me to pay for it. Even the ridiculous [Peacock Free Art Booth](#) in the unrepresented section of the fair was mildly amusing to me, a good sign as even outside a gallery this is exactly the kind of weak conceit that would normally infuriate me. This collective gives away their stock of art, one by one, (and all of it bad) to anyone who would talk to them. "Is there anyone who hasn't met your criteria?" I asked one of the collective members. Apparently, only one woman, who refused to hear even the artist's name or give her own. The participation bar is clearly set pretty low. Meanwhile, while the group refuses to give any visitor more than one art work, the rule was bent after a woman passionately made her case for why she should be given several (apparently the works she wanted were related).

This project probably isn't worth too much reflection. After all, it's hard to have substantive conversation about a nude painting that looks like it belongs to Owen Wilson's character in [The Royal Tenenbaums](#). Still, so long as I'm advocating for more participation from the DC community, I might as well advocate for art that encourages just that. Speaking of which, if the point of importing emerging talent from places like DC and Baltimore is to stir up discussion here during the fair, it might not be a bad idea to bring in better representatives. I'm pretty sure stronger Queens artists than the Peacocks can be identified.

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