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Washington, D.C., with a view of the Capitol Building and the Japanese-American Memorial



The National Gallery of Art East Building, with ongoing façade repair



Andy Warhol, *Shadows*, 1978-79, installed at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, collection Dia Art Foundation, © Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc., photo by Cathy Carver



Andy Warhol's 1958 drawing of the *National Enquirer* in "Warhol: Headlines" at the National Gallery of Art



Emerge Art Fair director Helen Allen at the National Gallery of Art



The Capitol Skyline Hotel in Washington, D.C., site of the 2011 Emmerge Art Fair



The Idea Store display at the 2011 Emmerge Art Fair

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Emmerge Art Fair SLOUCHING TOWARDS WASHINGTON by Walter Robinson

On a rainy Friday morning before the tourists are out, central Washington, D.C., can feel a little like imperial Rome. Great swaths of ceremonial lawn, towering dark bronze statues gargantuan piles of marble and granite, this is clearly a city that rules over a global empire with pomp and power.

It's easy to imagine, then, hidden in nearby workshops and ateliers, bustling throngs of artisans, portraitists, carvers, painters, designers, all in service to the great American oligarchy. It stands to reason, too, that these court artists should number among the most talented of the era.

But no. Instead we have **giant sculptures** imported from China as in the new **Martin Luther King Memorial**; unceremonious unveilings of 50-year-old pictures in the White House, notably **Norman Rockwell's** iconic Civil Rights painting *The Problem We All Live With* (1964); and a Republican Party so small-minded that all it can do is embarrass the nation with its silly culture wars, most recently by forcing the **removal of a videotape** of ants on a crucifix from a show at the **National Portrait Gallery**.

Perhaps that's just what you get in a so-called populist democracy. Still, you'd think the great American Imperium would be an irresistible subject for artists, especially in Washington. For paranoids, anyway, there's plenty.

You might have to read between the lines to understand, but it's there in plain sight. Last week the **Hirshhorn Museum** unveiled an encomium to the **CIA**, otherwise known as "**Andy Warhol: Shadows**," while the **National Gallery of Art** celebrates the propaganda machine that keeps all the people at bay in "**Warhol: Headlines**." (Curiously, the early-'80s *New York Post* report that **Madonna** would appear nude in *Playboy* was ruled off-limits to press photographers.)

OK, enough grandiose fantasies about art as a stick in the wheels of state. In 21st-century America, art is a branch of Finance, which is of course headquartered in New York, rendering Washington, D.C., as just another one of the provinces.

And so it was at the debut of the scrappy **Emmerge Art Fair**, Sept. 22-25, 2011, where a group of 80 exhibitors -- as many nonprofits, art schools and artists groups as professional galleries, if not more -- put on a good show on two-and-a-half floors (one being the parking garage) of the seven-story **Capital Skyline Hotel** right downtown, designed by the celebrated **Morris Lapidus** and owned by collectors **Don and Mera Rubell**. Rooms rented for \$4,500 for the fair.

Organized by veteran fair ramrod **Helen Allen** and D.C. dealer supreme **Leigh Conner**, the fair has been judged a success, with edition number two already in the works. High-profile exhibitors included **Monique Meloche**, our favorite Chicago art dealer, who brought works by **Ebony G. Patterson** ("Gangstas, Disciplez + the Doiley Boyz"), **Kendell Carter** and **Rashid Johnson**.



Mia Feuer's work at Conner Contemporary Art in the 2011 Emerge Art Fair.



Avery Lawrence, *Moving a Tree* (video still), at Heiner Contemporary at the 2011 Emerge Art Fair.



Kenny George at Flashpoint at the 2011 Emerge Art Fair.



Aubrey Mayer, *6-17-10A* (detail), a book of photos documenting Christopher Wool at work, at the room of White Columns at the 2011 Emerge Art Fair.



Jessica Cebrá "Shape" series sculptures at Transformer Gallery at the 2011 Emerge Art Fair.



The Idea Store display at the 2011 Emerge Art Fair.



Wilmer Wilson in performance at the Emerge Art Fair.



Sean Nafel of Peacock Interventions at their Free Art Booth at the 2011 Emerge Art Fair.

vintage, founded by **Margaret Heiner**, a former staffer at the **Freer and Sackler Galleries**, in a space across the street from **Addison Ripley Fine Art** in Georgetown. Her entire room -- wallpaper, props, paintings and a video unspooling on a large LCD screen on the wall -- was devoted to *Moving a Tree* by **Avery Lawrence**, a Rube Goldbergian homage to the artist's late grandfather that involved taking down a walnut tree on his family property in Central Virginia, cutting it into sections and then reassembling and re-erecting the tree on the same property, finally sending it skyward with balloons.

The job certainly looked like hard work, a good enough metaphor for the kind of Tantalus-like labors the gods, and we ourselves, impose on us poor humans. The great thing is that Heiner is selling the DVD, which is in an unlimited edition, for \$50.

You get value for your money in the art provinces, that's for sure, and the low price point was a common strategy at the fair.

Flashpoint Gallery, another venerable D.C. nonprofit, with exhibitions selected by an advisory panel, was a case in point. An artist named **Kenny George** had fitted out the room with three slot machines, a **Ms. Pacman** game and an actual pinball machine -- all with the graphics, electronic or otherwise, somewhat modified -- that could be freely, and noisily, played by all comers. Ding ding! A slot machine was \$400, and the almost-working-well pinball machine was a mere \$1,500.

The famed New York nonprofit, **White Columns**, was on hand with its usual selection of inexpensive original works -- "That girl's exhibiting next year at **Gavin Brown**," whispered New York dealer **Kathleen Cullen** -- as well as photographer **Aubrey Mayer's 6-17-10A**, a 600-page book of black-and-white photographs documenting the artist **Christopher Wool** at work on a painting. Examples from an edition of 100 signed copies, which come in a custom box with a poster, are priced at a mere \$200.

If only my apartment had space for more stuff.

In the room taken by **Transformer Gallery**, a nine-year-old D.C. nonprofit with a storefront gallery, the young artist **Jessica Cebrá** was offering her collage "Crystallize Study" drawings for \$100, and neat and solid-looking small tabletop geometric forms made of cardboard, plaster and acrylic paint, from her "shape" series, for \$95.

"Do you give a discount?" Cullen asked with some interest. "Sell it to her for the cash she has in her pocket," I urged, remembering a story **Irving Sandler** tells about the time he bought a work from **Willem de Kooning**. "Everything's on the website," said young Jessica, diffidently, letting her quarry escape.

Continuing down the price scale, in the hotel lobby was the **Idea Store**, where ideas -- that is, a rack of slips of paper with things written on them -- were 2¢ to buy and 1¢ to sell (a penny for your thoughts). A lot more selling seemed to have taken place than the other way around. The authors of this bagatelle are **Athena Robles** and **Anna Stein** of **Double A Projects**. My favorite: "Ideas should cost 3¢".

Emerge was decked out with a schedule of performances, by the way, which were pushed inside by the inclement weather. In one ballroom was the slim, barely dressed young performer **Wilmer Wilson**, who was gradually encasing himself in band-aids, starting with the head, in a ritual of some dignity, however ridiculous. He looked scary. And wounded.

Finally, downstairs in the parking lot, we got to rock bottom. The **Free Art Booth**, operated by **Peacock Interventions**, which consists of **Sean Nafel** from Queens and **Chris Attenborough** from Baltimore, Md., was actually giving artworks away, asking, "Is there such a thing as cultural capital?"

Not much was left late in the day, save for a selection of free drawings on vellum of the original 13 U.S. states by New York artist **Alan Lupiani**, who also is author of the **ArtBlogNYC**. Let's see, there's Maryland, Massachusetts -- and New Jersey, that's the one for me. Not only is the price right -- about what the White Man paid in the first place -- but it's easily the funniest state.

WALTER ROBINSON is editor of *Artnet Magazine*.