

Conversation with Kavi Gupta

By **Jori Finkel**

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At a time when the contemporary-art scene in Chicago pales beside those in New York, Los Angeles and perhaps even Miami, **Kavi Gupta** is doing his part to put his hometown back on the map. Along with running an eponymous gallery in the West Loop neighborhood, in April he launched the emerging-art fair **Next**—the Midwestern cousin to the **Volta** shows that he cofounded in Basel and New York. Jori Finkel talked to Gupta about the revival of Chicago as an art town, the big business of boutique fairs and his brush with **Oprah Winfrey**.

When I think about Chicago artists, I'm embarrassed to say that I feel hopelessly out-of-date. I have to think back to Jim Nutt and the Chicago Imagists from the 1960s.

You shouldn't be embarrassed. The truth is that Chicago has not been very fruitful in producing artists, or rather in keeping them. A lot of artists, like Paul Chan, Tom Friedman and Sterling Ruby, have gone to school here then moved to other cities and become quite famous. We had a really rough period in the '80s into the '90s when a lot of galleries were closing or leaving—a kind of anti-Renaissance.

What's changed since then?

In the mid-'90s, the Museum of Contemporary Art was reborn in this massive new space, and great curators like Francesco Bonami have since brought cutting-edge programming to the city. A lot of galleries also started opening up, mainly in the West Loop neighborhood, so there's more energy now.

I know yours was one of the first galleries in the West Loop, where Oprah Winfrey has her production studios. Have you ever met her?

I have not. But a while ago, I was walking across the street and I saw this big black bmw driving toward the intersection. The car rolled through the stop sign a bit and nudged my leg. I was ready to give the driver the finger, and I turned around and it was Oprah. Maybe I should have taken a fall just for the money in her pocket. Ka-ching!

What trends or developments do you see coming out of the city these days?

There's an interesting group of young photographers who do straight—not digitally manipulated—photography. We show Melanie Schiff, who was in the Whitney Biennial. Other examples are Jason Lazarus [Bucket Rider Gallery], Brian Ulrich [Rhona

Hoffman], Ben Gest [Stephen Daiter] and an artist collaborative called New Catalogue [Tony Wight]. Their emphasis is psychological storytelling—often melancholy, slow and thoughtful, paying homage to old-school photographers like Harry Callahan.

Is there anything in the Midwest, outside Chicago, you're paying attention to?

I just visited the John Michael Kohler Art Center, a Wisconsin museum that's tied to the Kohler design factory. It invites artists working with ceramics and porcelain to do residencies. It also just reinstalled a number of Outsider-art environments that it had bought and preserved, like a metal sculpture meant to be a "healing machine" that Emery Blagdon built in Nebraska and amazing figures by Nek Chand, who created the Rock Garden of Chandigarh in India.

When Merchandise Mart Properties purchased the Armory Show and Volta, it signaled to many that art fairs had become a part of corporate America. What did it mean for you?

There were only four of us running Volta during the first couple of years, and we were doing everything: hanging signs, carrying huge barricades across Basel, moving all the crates. Merchandise Mart brings all the back-office functions, from invoicing to exhibition packing. So what it really means for us is that we get to focus on being creative—finding galleries, curating shows, adding new elements.

It's a truism in the art world that there are too many fairs. Any predictions for which will be the first to go?

I think the real downturn will start this year with the satellite fairs—the very young ones that are trying to charge young dealers quite a bit of money. Those dealers aren't going to be able to afford it for long. We've already seen Flow bow out of Miami and Pulse pull out of London.

I live in L.A. and see a pretty steady stream of art-fair directors flying in to try to find a venue here. Are you considering a Volta Los Angeles?

I won't deny it. I can't say yes, but I won't deny that we're thinking about it.

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