

Art Chicago finds niche of its own

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In the 1980s and much of the '90s, Art Chicago reigned as this country's pre-eminent art fair, but it began losing its appeal to both dealers and buyers earlier in this decade and seemed on the brink of extinction.

But the annual art extravaganza is back. Merchandise Mart Properties Inc. rescued it in 2006 and has administered the last two installments after a total overhaul, packaging it as part of a much-publicized umbrella of concurrent events billed as Artropolis.

If Art Chicago has not regained its former standing, it has nonetheless reasserted itself as a major event, with this year's four-day edition in late April drawing more than 50,000 people – a 20 percent increase from last year.

About 350 galleries worldwide applied to the 200,000- square-foot fair on the 12th floor of The Merchandise Mart, and 181 were chosen to take part, including some heavy hitters from such major cities such as New York, Frankfurt, London and Seoul.

The quality was generally high, with major examples by everyone from Amedeo Modigliani to Milton Avery to Daniel Richter. Contemporary German art was well represented, and works by some of the hottest Chinese artists could be seen.

But because a major portion of the fair was devoted to modern art and certain key contemporary galleries were absent, the event did not possess the edginess or chic factor of its more au courant rivals, especially Art Basel Miami Beach.

The organizers tried to generate some of that vibe with the debut of Next, an invitational fair on a lower floor of the Mart with 180 or so emerging international galleries. But it seemed to have a kind of wannabe quality and didn't quite jell.

Of course, the point of these big expositions is to sell art, and that's where this year's edition of Art Chicago apparently stumbled. Merchandise Mart Properties does not release sales numbers, but anecdotal evidence suggested things didn't go so well.

A California dealer acknowledged as much but did not want to go on record saying it. Someone answering the phone at a major New York gallery said no one was available to talk about the fair and strongly suggested calling someone else.

"I do know that some of the other galleries were a little disappointed in terms of sales," said Rebecca Adib, director of Jeannie Freilich Contemporary in New York City, which participated in Art Chicago for the first time.

"It was great for us in terms of P.R., so we came out of it happy. We wish we made a few more sales, but we made enough to be happy."

She said the gallery plans to return next year, in part because she believes the fair's clientele like to build a relationship with a dealer before they decide to purchase anything.

"They're not the kind of people who are going to drop \$10,000 on an opening night, whereas the other fairs are more like that," she said. "It's just not as flashy, I would say."

Bud Shark of Shark's Ink, a nationally known publisher of original prints in Lyons, has taken part in Art Chicago for more than 20 years. He was generally pleased with the improvements to the fair, but acknowledged that his sales were just "fair" this year.

Shark said that many of the dealers felt that there was too much going on simultaneously at Artropolis, overwhelming attendees and diffusing some of the energy and excitement.

In response to such concerns, Merchandise Mart Properties has already announced in a follow-up release that it will move The Artist Project – one of the five main components of Artropolis – to a different weekend.

It's great to see Art Chicago back on track. It will probably not be able to compete anytime soon with the allure of Art Basel Miami Beach or New York City's Armory Show, but that's all right.

With the quality of its offerings back on solid footing and likely to only get better, it has found a niche of its own, offering a less charged, less intimidating yet still worthy alternative to those high-powered fairs.