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[Artropolis springs back to life for its 14th year at Merchandise Mart](#)

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A parade of sculpture once again has popped up on North Orleans, which can mean only one thing. Artropolis is back.

Spring wouldn't be spring without this celebration of art, antiques and culture that is centered in the Merchandise Mart but also spreads out to cultural institutions across the city.

Under the umbrella title Artropolis is Art Chicago, an international fair of contemporary and modern art, and NEXT, an invitational exhibition of emerging artists. Both are housed on the 12th floor of the Mart. Making it a trio is the International Antiques Fair, now in its 14th year; find it on the Mart's eighth floor.

Six years ago, Art Chicago, the city's once-great art fair, was all but dead. But an 11th-hour save by Mart president Chris Kennedy rescued the show. Since then, the Mart team works year-round to bring the fair back to its former prominence in the art world.

"We have a history of listening to dealers and artists and collectors," said Jennifer Woolford, the Mart's senior vice president. "Listening helped the event evolve over the years. And we adjusted things to make it right."

The revived show in 2006 drew 21,600 people. Last year, the number was more than 40,000 attendees, ranging from seasoned and novice collectors to art students and casual observers simply enjoying the vast range of art on exhibit.

A highlight of Art Chicago 2011 is a special exhibition by Shepard Fairey, the creator of the ubiquitous red, white and blue Barack Obama "Hope" poster. He and his Los Angeles-based team will create an outside installation on the Mart's south drive.

"We are thrilled that he accepted our invitation to do this," said Mart vice president Paul Morris. The piece will be a large mural. In addition, smaller works by Fairey will be on display at Art Chicago in the Robert Berman Gallery booth.

It's a given that one of the goals of Art Chicago and NEXT is to attract seasoned art collectors from around the world. But those just starting to think about collecting are not forgotten. A popular docent program helps "demystify the process of navigating the art world," Morris said.

The always interesting NEXT exhibit features emerging artists not yet affiliated with a gallery. Attached to this is New Insight, an exhibition of rising MFA students from 15 of the country's most influential art schools, curated by Susanne Ghez, executive director of the University of Chicago's Renaissance Society.

"Susanne pulls together a show of very interesting art work," Morris said. "For the collector, it's like Charles Schwab giving you 15 stock tips."

And if your taste runs to antiques and decorative arts, the International Antiques Fair is the place to be. Always filled with eye-catching trinkets, it's a great place to befriend dealers and hear the history of a piece that's caught your eye.

"These are the best dealers in the business," Woolford said. "You never know what they will bring with them, but it's always interesting."

Many arts and cultural venues throughout the city also are planning activities, events and programming during the show. For details, visit artropolischicago.com .

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