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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA ART

Fair Recap: Art Silicon Valley/San Francisco

OCTOBER 21, 2014

Sarah Amos, "First Bounce",
2014, collograph
construction, 66 x 78 x 2.5"
at Cynthia-Reeves

The booths were dismantled, the laptops stowed, and the unsold art crated and shipped back to its points of origin: LA, Chicago, New York, Boca Raton, London, Basel, Milan, Helsinki and elsewhere. Thus, the inaugural edition of Art Silicon Valley/San Francisco,

Art Miami's new international contemporary and modern art fair on the West Coast, came and went. What to make of yet another art fair?

It's no secret that fairs have transformed the once staid business of art into a thriving multi-billion dollar industry. Art Miami, celebrating its 25th year, is recognized as one the leaders. So it was no surprise that it chose to stage a fair at the doorstep of an ascending class of increasingly wealthy potential collectors, those being the freshly minted millionaires of the greater Bay Area. However, as any number of San Francisco gallerists will tell you, this is a notoriously tight-pocketed group, so it remains to be seen whether their affluence will translate to sales. When asked, dealers, as they always do at these events, spoke of great enthusiasm and "lots of interesting conversations." When I visited on a Friday — a day before Columbus Day weekend kicked into high gear — it was too early to judge the fair's success. A news release issued after the fair closed made no mention of sales, a surprise since post mortems generally boast of gross receipts, with particular attention paid to big-ticket, blue-chip items. Whether this omission is significant only time will tell.

Leonardo Drew, Number 158, 2012 @ Galerie Forsblom

The overall visual impression of the fair was one of elegance and respect for the presentation of high-quality works of art. Art Miami understands the need for graceful traffic patterns, strategic sight lines, great lighting, understatement and premium galleries. That said, there was a dismaying abundance of shiny, slick, smooth, deeply glazed and lacquered luxury objects that resembled refugees from a Sharper Image catalog — work that is all technique and content-free process. Perhaps it's the nature of art fairs, with their force feeding of an enormous amount work into one room that reveals just how rare original and meaningful art is. The best one can hope for, then, is that artists work from a place of need rather than taste mongering, and that they reject the

allure of brand polishing or participation in predigested classifications dressed in the look of art – what Jerry Salz called "zombie abstraction." One might also hope that collectors will be smart enough to recognize the difference, too, although that may be asking a lot of novices.

Dealers certainly recognized the proclivities of the tech crowd, evidenced in video works, interactive installations and Pop knockoffs. **Banksy'**s works, excavated from walls, were on view, as was a spectacular **Tony Oursler** sculpture, plus jaw-dropping prints from photographer **Sebastiao Salgado's** *Genesis* series, and the mind-bending mirrored works of the Korean artist **Chul Hyun Ahn**. But what sticks in memory lay elsewhere, in old treasures and in important new work waiting to be discovered. San Francisco dealer Foster-Gwin presented an untitled **Roy De Forest** oil and collage painting from 1958-1960. Made over time, the work's gritty surface endows its abstract shapes with a presence still fresh today. The gallery also showed several thick, very *wabi sabi* ceramic platters by **Peter Voulkos** and his lesser-known colleague, **Vaea**. Both packed a powerful punch.

Born 1929 in Tahiti to French parents, Vaea was educated in France, and then moved to France, Australia and Japan before settling in the U.S. in 1953. On view were three of his sculpted ceramic "saddle forms" referencing his Australian cowboy days. Like Franz West's ambiguous sculptures or the iconic *Slant Step,* these pieces appear familiar and utilitarian, yet ultimately function as a springboard for indeterminate ideas.

Vaea, Black Archaic Saddle, 1971 @ Foster-Gwin

One of the most powerful works of the fair, **Leonardo Drew's** wood and paint wall sculpture, *Number 158*, represented the Helsinki gallery Galerie Forsblom. A densely compacted wedge of long, painted wood splinters, the piece bristles with urgency and purpose.

Vidvuds Zviedris, a Chicago based, Latvian-born abstract painter showing with McCormick Gallery, Chicago, works paint into richly scraped layers and up-ended wedges. Interested in structure, Zviedris drags pigment across the canvas, sculpting dissonant, unmediated scraps of paint into aggregate platforms of architectonic space.

Native Australian and 2013 recipient of the Joan Mitchell award, **Sarah Amos**, represented by Cynthia-Reeves Gallery, New York, gives compelling evidence of the power of craft-

based work. Like ceramics, which

Gregg Renfrow, Garden, 2012 @ Toomey Tourell

was also long overlooked, art that employs fiber, textile and needlecraft can is accumulating interest, and can no longer be sidelined as craft. It bestows powerful language and presence in contemporary art. Amos's collograph construction, *First Bounce*, is a genuinely odd work of linear invention. Using printing, fabric, collage, and stitching, the work is an exhilarating spectacle of invention and rhizomic play.

The San Francisco Art Dealers Association presented a come-hither mix of work, notably a **Stephen Whisler** drawing, courtesy of Chandra Cerrito Contemporary, and **Caio Fonseca** etchings from Paulson Bott Press. Representing San Francisco gallery Toomey Tourell, the luminous, ethereal paintings of **Gregg Renfrow** reminiscent of late 1980's Gary Stephan, stood in sharp contrast to the aggressively sliced and excavated hardcover books of **Brian Dettmer**.

Tim Hyde, producer of the U.C. Davis special exhibition *The Invitation,* presented photographs that are the residue of interdisciplinary collaborative conversations between artists and other creative thinkers. There's

nothing to buy, nothing to sell. The exchange is one of germinal ideas created between individuals — ideas that may coil into something new. Or not. Unlike objects that may dissolve into irrelevance, ideas are evergreen, supplying a constant source of inspiration and renewal.

Dickson Schneider, working in conduction with tmoro projects, a Santa Clara-based nonprofit, gives his work (drawings, paintings, sculpture, poems) away. While his work

at the fair *was* for sale, he has given work away at the 2012 Aqua fair in Miami and at other venues in the U.S. and Europe. Interested in the nature and act of giving, Schneider observes that despite the appreciation garnered by his goodwill gestures, people are hesitant to accept his gifts. Which begs the question: Is something of value only if it's for sale? As the project's brochure (quoting Picasso) states, "The purpose of

art is washing the dust of daily life off our souls." If true, then art fairs are certainly kicking up a lot of dust. Yet Art Miami, by bringing such artists into the fair, proves quite clearly that it knows the difference between the fake and the real, thus holding out the prospect that collectors may know (or learn) the difference as well.

–JULIA COUZENS

Art Silicon Valley/ San Francisco, presented by Art Miami at the San Mateo Event Center, ran October 9-12, 2014.

About the Author:

Julia Couzens is a Sacramento-based artist and writer whose work has been widely shown, most recently at the di Rosa Preserve. Her drawings and hybrid objects are in museum and public collections throughout the U.S. These include the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts; Berkeley Art Museum; Oakland Museum; Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina; and Yale University. She lives and works on Merritt Island in the Sacramento River delta.

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