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Artropolis is better, but needs tweaking

ART | Merchandise Mart fair just needs some tweaking

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By now the word about Artropolis, the sprawling art expo at the Merchandise Mart last weekend, is that it was too big for its own good -- too many shows, too many exhibitors, too much sheer acreage.

It was so big that several exhibitors who were disappointed in their sales speculated that the fair's gigantism meant that the pie of the collector's spending power was cut into too many slices. Even some dealers who did relatively good business -- such as Joe Amrhein, director of Brooklyn's Pierogi Gallery, which sold a variant of Jonathan Schipper's popular "The Slow Inevitable Death of American Muscle," a pair of muscle cars colliding in super-slow-mo -- thought the show's size was a problem. "There was so much to see," Amrhein told me, "it seemed like people couldn't make up their minds."

But it's interesting problem to have, given that two years ago -- before the Mart bought the struggling Art Chicago from its previous owner -- and for years before that, the common complaint was that the fair had shrunk too much. After years of decline, top galleries were staying away.

No more. Artistically, at least, it's a case of rags to riches.

And we shouldn't forget the riches. Whatever the failings of this year's fair, it was clearly a massive improvement over what we had before. Virtually every big-name gallery in the American art world was in Chicago last weekend, as were many from Europe, Asia and Australia. NEXT, a lively new show of work by emerging artists, perfectly complemented the more established Art Chicago; certainly NEXT was far superior to the Bridge Art Fair, which it replaced in the Artropolis stable.

The Mart also deserves props for the work and money it put into refurbishing the 12th floor, where the Art Chicago exhibit spaces looked more like elegant galleries than temporary booths. (To complain about the low ceilings in the corridors, as some of the dealers did to me, is nit-picking.)

True, the Artist Project, expanded from 50 unageted artists last year to 300 this year, needs tweaking. There was too much mediocre work -- too much intermediate-level painting in particular -- and too little evidence of real discernment in the jurying. (You know you're in trouble when you feel the need to explain yourself, as some of the Artist Project exhibitors did, with booth labels like "Contemporary Myth" and "Where Dreams and Reality Converge.")

There was some excellent stuff in the Artist Project. I was blown away, for example, by the jauntily mysterious collages of Chicago's Kass Copeland (see more at www.kasscopeland.com). I also loved the work of Canada's Lee Henderson, whose photographs of condom-draped Bodhisattva statues were eerily beautiful meditations on the resilience of culture in the path of globalism. (See more of his work at www.noattainment.com.)

These were the exceptions, sadly, not the rule. And late this week, in response to criticism from dealers who thought the Artist Project diluted or detracted from the big shows, the Mart announced plans to detach the Artist Project from Artropolis. But I'd hate to see the Artist Project go away completely, partly because of Mart president Chris Kennedy's original impulse to provide an option for lower-income art-lovers who can't afford to buy anything at the higher-priced shows.

And if the Artist Project has to be cut loose from Artropolis, the Mart should also consider giving its International Antiques Fair a separate timeslot as well. Robert Landau, the big-ticket modern art dealer from Montreal, had it right. "I don't think an art fair should be mixed up with an antiques fair," he told me last week. "I don't have anything against the antiques dealers, but I

don't think they mesh with what we're doing."

Nor should the Mart accede to suggestions I heard from some dealers to jettison NEXT. Even if its video component tended toward a rote irreverence -- as in those defiantly whimsical or just plain juvenile tape loops that had patrons rolling their eyes at all the silly, Coke-can-smashing, fake-Jesus-on-the-cross pranks -- it was, overall, a much-needed breath of fresh air at Artropolis, which drew about 50,000 people.

Schipper's piece was the top crowd-pleaser, of course, but cruising just behind it was another piece of automotive art, Lee Stoetzel's "VW Bus" (2007), a replica of everyone's favorite countercultural chariot done in pecky cypress.

"I grew up in a conservative family in Phoenix, Ariz., but we rented a garage apartment to a guy in the '70s who had a VW bus that I liked to play in," Stoetzel explained. "It's always been a very symbolic car to me, symbolic of counterculture. This wood is kind of blown out, old-looking, and it's symbolic of nostalgia and older things."

Stoetzel, whose piece was attached to the booth of Mixed Greens Gallery of New York, was both happy and a bit freaked out by the popularity of his artwork, which had "do not touch" signs all around it that fairgoers were gleefully ignoring.

"People want to get in it," he told me queasily. "Now the door handles are pulled off and the stick shift is broken. I can't watch it, but I'm happy to elicit this kind of response, where people want to touch. It's a good sign, even if it makes my heart skip."

Stoetzel understands that touching thing, in part because he shares it: He drives the actual 1970 VW bus his artwork was modeled from. "When I drive it, people give me a peace sign or something," he said with a smile. "I'm a fairly conservative person, so I think it's funny."

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