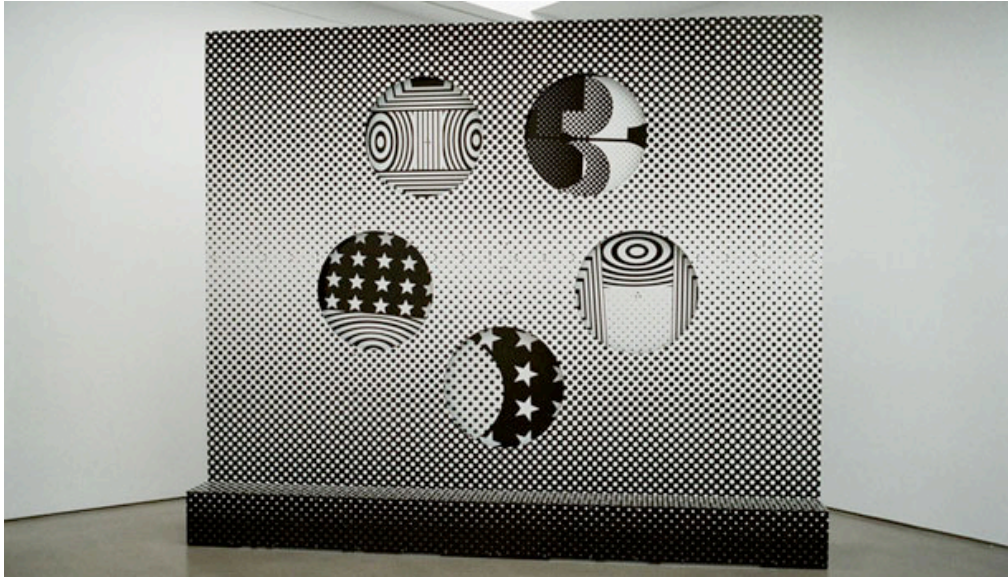


ARTINFO

At Art Chicago, Willing Buyers and Public Art



Courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago

Rodney Graham's "Rotary Psycho-Opticon," 2008, was part of a selection of work that Art Chicago featured that was not for sale.

By Amber Vilas

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CHICAGO— How does the 30-year-old **Art Chicago**, the granddaddy of U.S. art fairs, continue to hold its own against a bevy of other domestic art fairs vying for collector and gallery attention? The answer seems to be the city itself. Thursday night's preview opened the fair, which ran from April 30 to May 3, in a festive and celebratory mood. Notable figures like **Mayor Richard Daley** were in attendance, making their way through the shoulder-to-shoulder crowds and around to see the 150 galleries setting up shop on the 12th floor of the **Merchandise Mart** for the weekend.

A representative from London's **White Cube** cited Chicago as a "great city with two very important institutions and a wonderful history of collecting" as the reason for the gallery's participation in the fair. Prices in the White Cube booth ranged from \$4,000-\$5,000 for a **Christian Marclay** photograph to £2 million (\$3.5 million) for a **Damien Hirst** painting. The gallery reported numerous sales to U.S.-based collectors during the preview and first day of the fair.

As often happens, much of the action occurred during the preview. Milwaukee's **Dean Jensen Gallery** brought a range of works — priced \$3,000-\$70,000 — in lieu of solely big-ticket items. Yet, to his delight, Jensen kicked off the fair with a six-figure sale of a **Christopher Wool** drawing within the first hour of the preview. Two **Albert Oehlen** pieces in collage, ink, and pencil on paper sold at Chicago's **Corbett vs. Dempsey** for \$15,000 each. **Berlin's Wilde Gallery also started the fair off well, with the sale of Antonio Santin's *E Mare*, 2010, for \$18,000.** Still, gallery owner **Peter Wilde** said Chicago collectors are "cautious and take their time" as opposed to New York collectors, who buy quickly and use lines like, "I'll pull the trigger on that."

Galerie Forsblom of Helsinki got a two-for-one deal by shipping their artworks for both Art Chicago and the **Armory** to the States in the same crate. One of the standout pieces in the booth was a **Julian Schnabel** self-portrait priced at \$500,000. Haunch of Venison — of London, New York, and Berlin — credited their first-time participation in the fair to the attraction of Chicago as a city “with its own client base that is worth exploring.” Work in the booth was priced from \$5,000, for an **Ian Monroe** painting, up to \$1 million.

Rhona Hoffman, of her eponymous Chicago gallery, was in full force in her consistently busy booth, where for four days she engaged in an almost unbroken string of conversations with fair attendees. Works in the booth ranged from \$1,400 up to the \$100,000 range, for works by **Art & Language**. The gallery reported sales of work by Spencer Finch, some **Robert Ryman** prints, and several smaller Mel Bochner pieces, priced between \$2,000 and \$4,500.

Pace Prints, which had done the fair a few times but skipped last year, was back this year in an effort to reconnect with clients, started off with strong sales, including pieces by Jim Dine, whose work was priced from \$3,500 to \$20,000. Prices went as high as \$70,000.

The booth at Chicago’s **Golden Gallery** sparkled with fiber-based works by Mike Andrews, drawings and a painting by Pamela Fraser, and photographs — highly saturated, often whimsically composed still lifes of everyday objects — by Jessica Labatte. Pieces in the booth ranged from \$1,200 to \$10,000.

While Art Chicago maintained a standard grid-style floor plan, rather than opting for the labyrinthine approach that caused some frustration at this year’s **Art Basel Miami Beach**, the fair did offer several special exhibitions that provided welcome breaks from the rows of booths. Curated by Susanne Ghez, director of the **Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago**, “New Insight” returned this year with an exhibition of work by MFA students from around the country. And throughout Merchandise Mart, artists such as John Clement, **Dzine**, Rodney Graham, Kiki Smith, and Tony Tasset contributed 27 large-scale, indoor and outdoor sculptures.

For “Partisan”, another special exhibition, independent curators Rachel Furnari and Karsten Lund trolled the galleries participating in Art Chicago as well as **NEXT**, the invitational exhibition of emerging art. Perhaps to counterbalance the market-driven programming in the fair’s booths, the curators chose work that explores social and political ideas.

“Survey America” took the form of an intervention. Art Chicago selected standout pieces by artists living and working in the United States that are emblematic of major developments in American art and tagged them with a blue Survey America wall label. The labels served both to draw attention to pieces deserving a longer look and also highlighted connections from booth to booth. They proved an effective way of helping viewers metabolize the abundance of work at the fair.

Swiss-born artist **Florian Graf**’s *Lost Waltzing Walls* rounded out Art Chicago’s special projects. His charming installation consisted of artworks displayed on freestanding walls, which were meant to glide across the floor and sway back and forth at the slightest touch. During the preview one of the walls briefly blocked the middle of an aisle. Unfortunately however, the walls for the most part did not succeed in gliding through the fair. They were instead corralled in a booth, shifting to and fro, and, like so much in the fair, they seemed to shiver with energy and the desire to be brought out.