



(e)merge Art Fair 2012 by Ian MacLean Davis

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Words: Cara Ober



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Thoughts and Reactions to Washington DC's (e)merge Art Fair 2012 at the Capitol Skyline Hotel by Ian MacLean Davis

The painter David Reed has a body of work he discusses as “bedroom paintings.” At (e)merge Art Fair, housed in the Capitol Skyline Hotel, every painting is a “hotel room painting” or a “bathroom sculpture,” and each space is loaded with cognitive dissonance. Picture yourself in a hotel room devoid of beds and furniture, elbow-to-elbow with twenty strangers. Just the body count alone elicits a strangeness. At (e)merge, just as often the beds and furniture remained in hotel rooms, further cramping spaces already overwhelmed with images, artwork and spectators.

A regular (non-hotel) art fair is customarily held in a large utilitarian space with high ceilings to mediate the crowds and artworks, to facilitate a somewhat neutral environment for presentation. A hotel room cannot ever offer these qualities. However, the rooms, as claustrophobic as they can feel, are eminently approachable. Their purpose is to offer familiar comfort. But, it's a strange thing to see not-apparently-site-specific artwork installed in a hotel room bathroom. It's equally weird to view emerging contemporary art installed in bedrooms.

While event press materials stated, "over 80 international exhibitors in two platforms, exhibiting 152 artists from 24 countries" participated, (e)merge fundamentally functions as a bellwether on the current state of contemporary arts in the Mid-Atlantic region. An annual event such as this helps define a community that sprawls through at least two states plus DC. Hotel fairs have been around for a few years, growing as parasitic extensions of larger, more established fairs as Miami Basel. However, this fair stands alone. It's an independent event, and that singularity permits and demands greater impact.

I visited for a few hours, on Saturday, the last of the three days open to the public. It wasn't enough time. Installed across four levels of the hotel, works were divided into the "Artists Platform" and "Gallery Platform." The Gallery Platform was the domain of represented artists and their galleries, as well as a few organizations such as Washington Project for the Arts and MICA. You could find these on two floors converted into gallery spaces, as well as a mix of performance and installation artwork on the lower parking level.

The "Artist Platform" was featured on the lobby and lower level, featuring artists who weren't specifically associated with galleries, but were curated into the event. Art was curated into four distinct areas: lobby, a large function room, a smaller function room, and the bar/pool area, with work hung in the hallways connecting these spaces that was, unfortunately, easily overlooked. The smaller function room was awkward and uncomfortable, as it also served as the location for panel discussion programming and performances earlier in the week and day.

The remaining spaces were, in a word, FUN. Life-size static sculptures of bearded men in white bunny suits interacted – casually, playfully – in the hotel lobby and fitness center (Alex Podesta.) The art in the large room and the bar/pool area extended this play with a carnival-like feel. The interior room

included a ferris wheel (Michaela Savu), a trinket cart-vendor (Joyce Yu-Jean Lee), thrift-store aesthetic with multi-genus quasi-vooodoo anthropomorphism (Prune Noury) and some gypsy style (Becky Slemmons).

From my conversations with these artists, and my eager eavesdropping, each of these artists' work was thoughtful with cogent content. However, their cumulative aesthetic effect left the greatest impact. From that room, large, floor-level snakes of steel drew from the bar to the outdoor pool area. The pool (voted 'Best Pool' by Washingtonian Magazine for the past three years) would always demand attention on such a dramatic patio, but Andrew Wodzianski activated this space with a performance, Self Portrait as Ishmael, that parodied an escape artist. As he floated in the center of the water for thirty-six straight hours on a solidly-crafted raw wood casket, he had the appearance of being stranded in a self-imposed exile. The crowd witnessed him carving an intricate decoration into the lid of the crate, and occasionally napping. At the end of the performance, he rolled himself into the chlorinated water and slowly guided his raft to the pool edge where assistants helped him and the structure out, emerging from his durational challenge.

Outside of the bar was a vibrant, mournful shanty of tragic reliquary which functioned as the booth-based, socio-political activism of Mandy Cano Villalobos. Adjacent were glued scraps of nylon and zippers formed into the colorful cartoon figures of Melissa Iciuji, which acted as planters, vomiting long grasses. The casual spectatorship elicited by art performances was quietly tweaked by Katie Kehoe. I watched her arrange a welcoming half-circle of deck chairs around herself only to lounge alone, watch the crowd, and wait for something to happen. It wasn't apparent that she a performance herself – only ironically hinted at by her "I (Heart) DC" t-shirt.

The non-performing artists in the Artist Platform were also present and usually standing with their work, ready to engage visitors. They spent three days explaining their work and receiving a wide range of reactions to their craft and concepts. As artists, we develop our ideas and practice over years of discussion and critique and we all have our "elevator speech" to succinctly communicate our core ideas in two minutes or less. I imagine repeating this speech over the course of three days to be some fresh idea of Hell. However, speaking directly to strangers and the curious about what we do is also a rare gift.

The context of the hotel sometimes made the interaction between art and viewers a bit strange. Imagine that your designated exhibition space is located in a random cubicle, behind a row of tables in the restaurant, or in an underutilized corner of the lobby. There was awkwardness to these smaller installations that amplified the forced nature of such public interactions. In these instances, the retail world of the upper floors of the Gallery Platform bled down onto the stand-alone artists in a specific way that was ill-fit.

Where most of the ground-floor developed a cumulative effect, the upper gallery levels exemplified the fundamental weaknesses of art fairs: sensory overload and awkward re-contextualization. In its second year, the fair added a new restriction to exhibitors: no holes in the hotel room walls. Creative use of temporary adhesives and unconventional presentation methods were alternately impressive and clumsy. In fact, the same might be said of the collected artwork. Discussing the Gallery Platform artwork in a useful or critical way is impossible. There was simply too much and too much variable; in audience, purpose, presentation and skill. There was not, and could not ever be enough time to properly experience the work or give enough of it their due.

Art Fairs are especially strange for artists. I can't claim that my experience last weekend matches anyone else's. Until (e)merge, I'd never been to ANY Art Fair, ever. I've been shown in them, and have packed a gallery for one, but attending has never worked out. So, this was a new experience.

Overall, I had a wonderful time at (e)merge 2012. However, I think I might not be the ideal audience for an art fair, anywhere, of any size or context. This sort of event is primarily for non-artists – the public who seek to purchase work, or otherwise be exposed to new artists and experiences. It was a friendly, dynamic, and professional event towards that end. As a fine artist, for me, it was a trade show of which I was not a participant. It was also professional research, a place to visit friends, and an opportunity to view an excess of accomplished work and be intellectually fueled. I'm looking forward to next year already.

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