

# Dessert Trail

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**SO NOW WE KNOW:** The other shoe (clearly a mule) is definitely dropping on the current art market, at least by the look of the "gala" preview last Wednesday night for the twenty-first annual Art Dealer's Association of America fair (aka the Art Show). On arrival, the first person I saw was Sotheby's auctioneer Tobias Meyer, whose forced smile indicated he was keeping up a good front. Of course, that's his job. Mine is to see past it. Early in the evening, as usual a benefit for the worthy Henry Street Settlement, there wasn't much to see, at least not in terms of a crowd. It was thin. That was lovely, making it possible to hold pleasant conversations about art with dealers who rarely can spare an innocent the-time-of-day during the prime sales hour.

In fact, most everyone at this fair, expecting the worst, seemed relaxed and easy, though some dealers wore dour expressions throughout the opening, which seems awfully bad for business. But who knows? Maybe it's reverse psychology. High-pressure sales techniques clearly don't work, at least not on MoMA trustee Donald Marron. Making an entrance, he ducked into PaceWildenstein, which always seems to get the choice location facing the door, just to stash his trench coat in the booth's closet. "I'll be back!" he said, wiggling out of the clutches of an employee trying to sell him one of the gallery's late Sol LeWitt gouaches. "I just got here," Marron said, turning away. "Give me a minute to look around."

"I hate this fair," a visiting dealer muttered in my ear. "The booths are too small to make any kind of presentation, and everything looks terrible. Well," she conceded, indicating Ronald Feldman's back-corner booth, "that's ambitious." The veteran SoHo dealer, whose single-artist, art-fair material is dependably, if not commercially, best-in-show, had indeed gone all out, covering the booth walls in pitch-black fabric and plopping Tavares Strachan's sealed, glass-walled kiosk at the center. Inside it was an actual New Haven parking meter ripped up with twenty feet of pavement (and attendant street trash), basking in bright fluorescent lighting. Some people, particularly an artist carrying a resentment, will do anything to avoid paying a parking ticket. It must have cost far more just to bring it to New York—but then where would art be now if not for the grand, overindulgent gesture?

Personally, I like this fair. Limited to seventy dealer booths, its scale is reasonable, its aisles comfortably carpeted, and its attractions sophisticated and subtle. This edition was particularly peaceful; perhaps bankrupt Lehman Brothers' absent sponsorship was responsible, though I'm not sure anyone missed it. Well, maybe the company's overindulgent CEO Richard Fuld, who probably won't be buying art anytime soon. No one else appeared to be doing much business, either. Friedrich Petzel was literally twiddling his thumbs when I stopped by to see the Nicola Tyson torso paintings he had on view. Corinna Durland was perusing the shelves of vintage books that Gavin Brown had installed in his booth, apparently anticipating a hush. Sean Kelly, who was making his first appearance at this fair with a modest Antony Gormley "void" sculpture of steel rods, was telling collector John McEnroe that good secondary-market had been hard to come by. "It's all mediocre!" the tennis pro complained, true to form. Collectors aren't selling, Kelly explained, as their art holdings are retaining more value than any other "property" right now. There's comfort, I suppose.

Not that there weren't some thrills to be had, even if of the cheapest kind. I got a kick out of watching *New Yorker* critic Peter Schjeldahl join dealer Matthew Marks in caressing the suggestive Ken Price ceramics that the latter had on sale. One, of two pieces locked in amorous embrace, had a very appropriate title: *Eek!* And I loved playing Mungo Thomson's fifty steel-hanger "chimes" on their coat rack, left from the last Whitney Biennial, at Margo Leavin. For the recession-weary, the ADAA instituted "Dealer's Choice" bargains, for single works at "attractive" prices. That put a Joel Sternfeld photo of the High Line railroad weedscape on the market for ten thousand dollars at Luhning Augustine. "We're just planting seeds here," said gallery director Natalia Sacasa. No pun intended, I'm sure.

The most startling installation was at Michael Werner, in a juxtaposition of exquisite alabaster heads from 100 BCE Arabia with the late Eugene Leroy's thickly impastoed twentieth-century paintings (once an inspiration to Georg Baselitz). The gallery has been gathering the heads for a few years now, director Gordon Veneklasen said, mostly from British collections that were started in the 1930s. A breath of fresh air at this obdurately conservative fair. I kept hearing people asking aloud what next week's Armory Show will be like. "Disaster" was the most popular answer.

Maybe. Asked what he bought at the Art Show, Michael Ovitz said, “One of everything!” and darted out the door.

Frankly, things have been looking better in New York galleries of late, particularly those hot enough to make even those that claim to have seen everything blush. That was the case Thursday night, first at Lisa Yuskavage’s opening at David Zwirner, where she was displaying—truly the operative word—a number of beautifully executed, spread-legged portraits of women with prominent pudenda. Apparently, Rachel Feinstein, eight months pregnant with her third child, was the model for one of them, shortly after giving birth to her second. Oddly, John Currin seemed more entranced by another canvas, featuring two women. I heard someone mutter something about calendar art. Others simply expressed joy and wonder. This is why I love openings: the unfettered opinions they provoke in all.

Up in Mary Boone’s Fifth Avenue rooms, Will Cotton was showing new Candyland paintings delectable enough to eat, attended by a crowd of literary suspects—writers Bill Powers and James Frey, old book-and-print dealer John McWhinnie—and artists like Cotton’s onetime studio mate Cecily Brown, also eight months pregnant, with her first. (“She’s so heavy!” Brown confided, sounding surprised.) Boone was locked in an intense confab with an especially scruffy Tom Sachs before decamping for dinner at Bottino in Chelsea, where the mood was notably upbeat—perhaps it was all that sugar in Cotton’s paintings?—and the guests included several gallery artists, both veteran (Ross Bleckner) and new (Jacob Hashimoto, Luis Gispert). Battlefield artist Steve Mumford, an adviser to Jeremy Deller’s present dialogues-on-Iraq show at the New Museum, gave the conversation at one table a current-affairs boost, speaking of his experience with troops in Baghdad in 2004. Why does that seem like ancient history? We took a moment to remember Steve Vincent, the art journalist who was murdered there in 2005 after writing an op-ed on the war in the *New York Times*. And then it was on to dessert.

— Linda Yablonsky