

Art

Is There Room for Care at an Art Fair?

One might go to an art fair anticipating spectacle, but what I found at Expo Chicago was much more heartening, and deeply Midwestern.



Sarah Rose Sharp April 14, 2023

CHICAGO — “What is the relationship between care and curating? It is in the word, after all.” That’s the question posed by Renaud Proch, executive and artistic director of the Independent Curators International (ICI), at the opening of the 10th edition of Expo Chicago, which kicked off yesterday, April 13. The organization partners with the fair to provide professional development opportunities for some 70 invited curators and museum directors from the US and around the world. Inspired by this proposition, I took to the floor to see if I could find evidence of care here at an art fair, notoriously a site for that most mercenary of art world considerations: sales. With 170 international exhibitors representing 36 countries and 90 cities, there is an awful lot of ground to cover this year — every square foot of the massive Navy Pier exhibition hall is decked out with their brightest stars and best efforts, plus special sections like the Exposure corridor, which features solo and two-artist presentations from galleries 10 years old or younger; and Special Exhibitions, centering curatorial projects that highlight the relationship between contemporary art and nonprofit organizations.

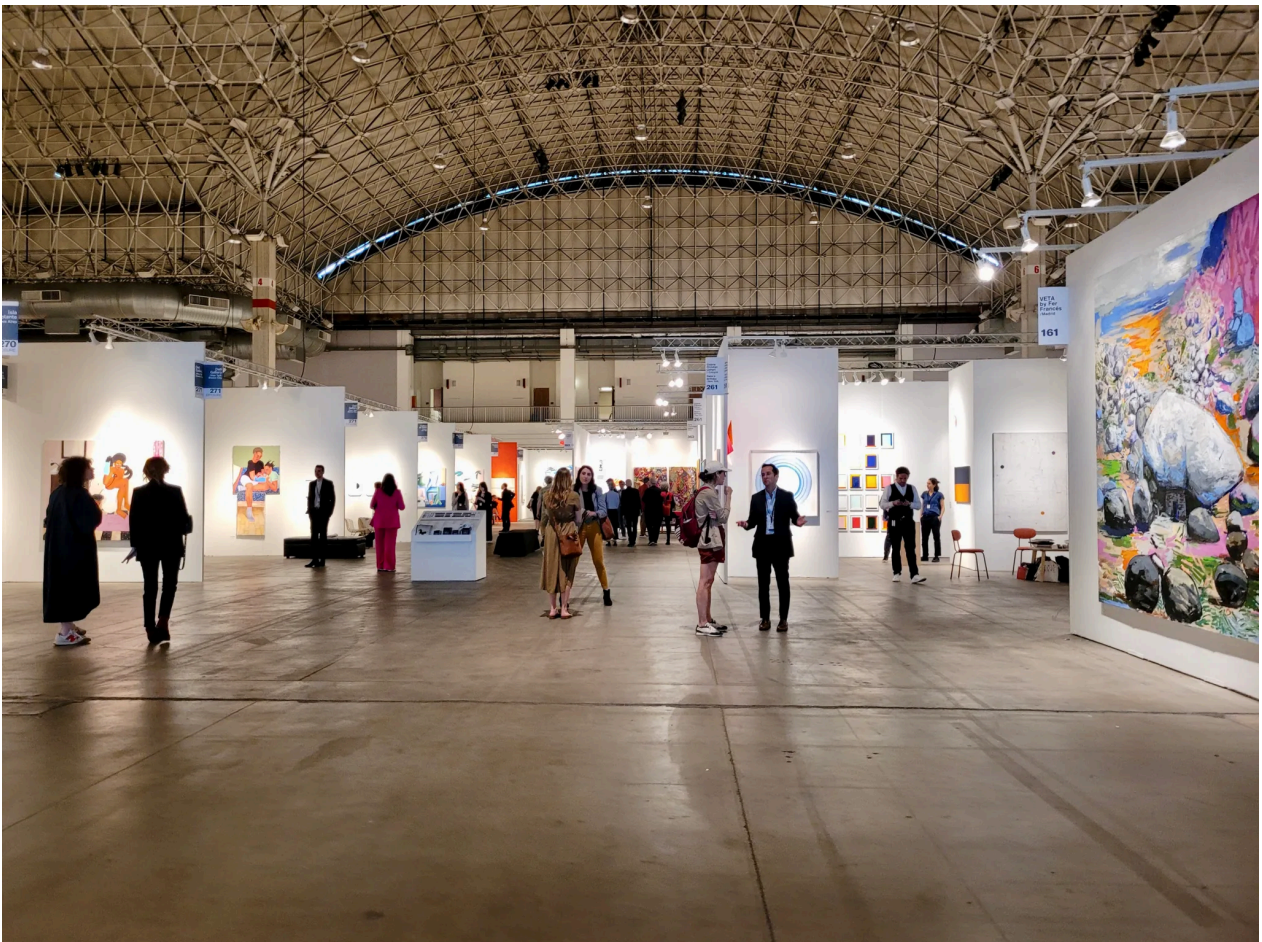
There were ridiculous moments, of course, including what appeared to be a product-placed Audi parked inside the exhibition hall. At least one Los Angeles dealer appeared not entirely ready to meet the preview audience, with their desk completely covered in small paintings still in their boxes. And when I stopped to inquire about some of the works on display at the University of Chicago’s Department of Visual Arts booth, I was told by a frazzled student staffing it alone that the materials identifying the artists “were supposed to be here by now.” Anyone attending Expo Chicago looking for high drama, however, might find themselves disappointed. Miami might love a spectacle, but the Midwest keeps things straightforward, sincere, and focused on the art.

My initial plan was to tackle the floor in an orderly and systematic way so nothing would be missed. Three minutes in and I'm crisscrossing the space like [Billy from Family Circus](#), chasing one art crush after another. I settled down for my first quiet moment at Chicago's Stephen Daiter Gallery, drawn in by a display of small faux naïve oil paintings by Isidor (Pop) Wiener, and uncovered an incredible story of intergenerational care to go along with them. Dan Wiener, Isidor's son, was a successful documentary photographer who encouraged his father to pursue an untrained interest in painting once he retired in his golden years. The gallery is presenting an intact collection of the elder Wiener's works, as well as selections of black-and-white photography by the younger — all made possible by his family's efforts.

"Dan Wiener's son-in-law John Broderick has been carrying on the tradition for a number of years, and cared for [Dan's wife] Sandra into her nineties," said gallery founder Stephen Daiter. "Now he's kind of taking care of the legacy."

At the booth of Detroit gallery Reyes|Finn, which was showing a selection of ceramic works by Marie Herwald Hermann and paintings by Leif Ritchey, co-founder Bridget Finn mused on what "care" means in a regional context.

"Having a gallery in the Midwest, you also care very much about location, and having a dialogue with your community and your peers — but also the art world at large, and being able to connect



The Expo Chicago floor

those pieces,” Finn said. “For me, that is really satisfying and doing a fair in the Midwest that is of this profile really allows us to get that perfect.”

Of course, there was tons to care about on an eye-candy level. A giant bronze self-portrait sculpture at Cape Town’s Southern Guild indicates that photographer and filmmaker Zanele Muholi is exploring a new medium for portraiture. Artist Ebony G. Patterson was visible from a thousand feet, holding down Chicago’s Monique Meloche Gallery with a group of her large-scale, intermedia tapestry works. “Funtime Unicorns” (2022), a sort of sculptural queer hobby horse by Derrick Adams, drew me into Chicago’s Rhona Hoffman Gallery before I noticed it featured on the Expo magazine cover; while I was there, I became enchanted with a selection from **a series of works by Michael Rakowitz** that deals with looted antiquities.

I flew across the fair, summoned by the flocked cherubs adorning Miami-based Mindy Solomon Gallery, and loved them all the more when I discovered they were made by Moises Salazar in tribute to the victims of the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting. I even found a little care for the environment at 6018North, a Chicago-based experimental arts and culture venue with a collection of streetwear fashions curated by Tria Smith made entirely out of upcycled, street-salvaged trash— a puffer jacket from recycled coffee bags by Alex McDermott; circle purses co-designed and made by Lilith Parker; accessories co-designed by KHÔI; trash-foraging bags by Declan Flynn— as well as the booth itself constructed by Lan Tuazon using Waterbricks, a container system for people in need of bulk water and food.

Though the first-day preview was not the best for crowd-watching or the most colorful art student stunts, the fair’s early visitors were an upbeat mix of locals and out-of-towners, and all of them were oozing with enthusiasm.

“I mean, it’s inspiring,” said Chicago-based mixed media artist Katie Fountain when I stopped her on the floor to get her take on the fair, which she is attending for the second time. “I would say it’s a little overstimulating at first, because there’s just so much bombarding you. But it’s one of the things that I’ve been looking forward to for months.”

Most exhibitors indexed for eye-catching displays, but a few gambled on a quiet moment. New York’s Patrick Parrish Gallery presented a solo debut of new work by Eric Oglander, some 60 pieces, most of which were minimalist sculptures small enough to fit in cupped hands.

“With big work, it’s easy to get attention,” said the gallery attendant. “He likes the challenge of working small.”



Krystle Lemonias at Andrew Rafacz

These are, of course, just a fraction of the offerings, exhibitors, programming, and offsite events surrounding what promises to be a big weekend for the Chicago art community, and beyond. One might go to an art fair anticipating spectacle, shenanigans, and eye-watering sales numbers, but the thing I found was much more heartening, and also deeply Midwestern: an environment of care, enabled by a deep work ethic and sincere enthusiasm for bringing art together with its audience.