

San Francisco Chronicle  
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Saturday, January 18, 2003

Caption: An untitled 1952 painting by Franz Kline, offered by John Berggruen Gallery of San Francisco, is a highlight of the works on view at the San Francisco International Art Fair this weekend at Fort Mason.

#### MASS APPEAL: ART COMES AT VISITORS FROM ALL DIRECTIONS AT THE S.F. INTERNATIONAL ART FAIR

People openly confess to museum fatigue these days -- the tiring overstimulation of taking in more art than humanly possible.

But we never hear about art fair fatigue: the inevitable byproduct of an event like the fifth annual San Francisco International Art Fair, which fills the Herbst and Festival pavilions at Fort Mason through Monday.

Museum curators work to mitigate spectator overload when they display art. Recall the beautiful phrasing of the Gerhard Richter show just ended at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

But no one keeps things in bounds at an art fair.

Exhibitors pay heavily to rent floor space and transport goods, and they understandably tend to pack their movable walls and pedestals with as much art as feasible.

Roughly 100 galleries representing 2,000 artists make up the 2003 fair. The event offers very different things to different visitors.

The moneyed collector can mop up at this year's fair. A sputtering economy creates haggle room, and even galleries of little distinction bring the best material they have.

One person's bargain being another's intolerable extravagance, prices at the fair are said to range from \$100 to \$4 million, the bulge probably being in the high four- to low five-figure area.

To the broad public with no collecting budget, the fair offers a panoramic snapshot of the contemporary art market. Freedom from acquisitiveness may be the real key to enjoying such a spectacle.

The well-informed visitor will be looking for interesting discoveries, unfamiliar artists and outstanding individual works. More than scarcity accounts for the difficulty in finding them. Just as an art fair guarantees sensory overload, it also makes a shambles of even the educated viewer's sense of artistic context.

The discouraging, if not surprising, news of this year's fair is the low number of galleries from abroad. Berlin, London, New York and even Los Angeles are very sparsely represented. Their scarcity makes local participants look better than they might otherwise. But most of the Bay Area dealers' booths could be transplanted to a contemporary art fair anywhere in the world and hold their own.

Braunstein-Quay's booth looks stronger here than on an average business day, leading with arresting paintings by Mary Snowden, Nell Sinton and John Altoon.

Anthony Meier delivers a whole wall full of paint-defaced photographs by Gerhard Richter, a wonderful addendum to the retrospective.

Haines arrays on one wall the images Andy Goldsworthy sent the gallery, one or two a day, over a month of working on his land at home in Scotland.

Hackett-Freedman offers portrait heads by Richard Diebenkorn and David Park unknown to me before.

But there are discoveries scattered throughout the fair. Both PDX Gallery from Portland and Nashville's Cumberland Gallery present not-to-be-missed landscape-like abstractions by a painter named James Lavadour. The differences between more and less persuasive examples of his work make a fascinating study.

Two abstract charcoal drawings by Christine Hiebert presented by Philadelphia's Gallery Joe will make people dream of this artist's first solo show here (unscheduled, to my knowledge).

Aaron Fink has been a familiar name in Boston and New York for many years, but being little-known here, his work makes a strong impression as presented by Boston's Alpha Gallery and Alysia Duckler of Philadelphia.

A few great things always crop up at the high end of the market: a Franz Kline painting on paper offered by John Berggruen, a 1965 De Kooning painting on paper brought to town by Allan Stone and a corner full of Malevich drawings presented by New York's Neuhoff Gallery.

San Francisco's Linc Real Art, besides offering a powerful and strange selection in its booth, has arranged something unique in the San Francisco fair's history: an installation work larger than many dealers' booths.

As an adjunct to its current show of Bay Area eccentric Wally Hedrick, Linc presents Hedrick's "The War Room" (1967), a large cubical enclosure made of all black stretched canvases turned inward. The piece originally responded to the Vietnam War, but it has regained an unwished-for timeliness. It is the most topical thing on view and a significant item of Bay Area art history.

Since the first San Francisco International Art Fair hit town five years ago, people have been saying it would have a five-year run.

In response to this rumor, Thomas Blackman, the Chicago impresario who stages the event, equivocated. "I want to see it continue," Blackman said. "We'll be looking very carefully at how this year's fair goes."

Attendance, profitability, the kind of business done by participating dealers and an increasingly competitive national and international schedule of art fairs all have to be weighed.

Watch to see whether Blackman opens an office out here. He thinks that having someone to keep an eye on the local art landscape will be essential in planning future art fairs for San Francisco.