

# Was Expo Chicago a Success? Dealers Dish on the Fair's Ambitious First Edition

BY JULIA HALPERIN | SEPTEMBER 26, 2012



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Expo Chicago 2012  
(Expo Chicago via Facebook)

Launching an art fair in Chicago is a gutsy enterprise. The city's art market has a storied history that is hard to live up to and a recent past that's hard to live down. Longtime exhibitors remember the golden days of **Art Chicago** in the 1980s, when it seemed like the only fair in the world. Younger collectors, meanwhile, know Art Chicago only as the bloated, uninspiring **Merchandise Mart**-owned exhibition that finally called it quits in February. It is this mix of nostalgia, uncertainty, and ambition that made last week's [debut of Expo Chicago at the city's Navy Pier](http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/801365/expo-chicago-reveals-its-inaugural-exhibitor-list-hoping-to-prove-the-windy-city-can-draw-the-best-once-more) (<http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/801365/expo-chicago-reveals-its-inaugural-exhibitor-list-hoping-to-prove-the-windy-city-can-draw-the-best-once-more>) so highly anticipated — and highly scrutinized. Expo Chicago is an art fair the community actually cares about.



“The city wanted a fair — it was palpable, especially as Art Chicago started to descend,” said **Joel Straus**, a local consultant and investor in Expo. “It’s part of our cultural ego. People feel that Chicago deserves a great fair.”

Did it get one? The answer was almost unanimous among more than two-dozen dealers **ARTINFO** spoke with during and after the fair: Yes. “I never thought we’d be coming back to Chicago,” said **Frank Maresca** of New York’s **Ricco/Maresca Gallery**. “But this show is as beautiful as any that’s ever existed on Navy Pier.” Mayor **Rahm Emanuel** rubbed shoulders with curators from the **Art Institute of Chicago** and the **Museum of Contemporary Art** (though, to this reporter’s disappointment, **Oprah** was nowhere to be found). Local starchitect **Jeanne Gang** of **Studio Gang Architects** designed the layout,

which offered a floorplan reminiscent of Chicago’s city grid and aisles so wide that, according to dealer **Rhona Hoffman**, “it was difficult to discern how many people were there.”

As with all fairs, however, it is commerce, not comfort, that will bring dealers back for a second year. Galleries were cautiously positive, if not glowing, about sales at Expo. One exhibitor quipped that dealers were selling more art to each other than to collectors. “It was good — not great, but not a disaster by any means,” said **William Shearburn**, owner of the eponymous St. Louis gallery. (Among other works, Shearburn sold a large, rainbow-colored text painting by [\(/artists/23839-mel-bochner\)](/artists/23839-mel-bochner) **Mel Bochner** (</artists/23839-mel-bochner>) bearing lofty phrases such as “Head Honcho” and “Master of the Universe.”)

“Like all fairs, it takes a while to get engrained in people’s calendars,” said **Anthony Meier**, of San Francisco’s **Anthony Meier Fine Arts**. He observed notable absences among collectors and institutions from Milwaukee, Des Moines, and other Midwest cities. “Dealers, museums, art consultants — they plan their travel schedules 15 or 16 months ahead,” he explained. (Officials from the **Cleveland Museum of Art** were in attendance, however, so it was not a categorical void.)

“I’m confident in the long-term play here,” founder **Tony Karman** told ARTINFO after the fair. “A first-year fair is never easy. You can’t expect everyone to flock to it.”

Despite less than overwhelming turnout from neighboring cities, Expo boasted a significant bundle of sales at a variety of price points. On the lower end, the booth of San Francisco’s **Jessica Silverman Gallery** — which presented a solo show of loosely geometric abstract paintings on wood panels by Istanbul-born **Hayal Pozanti** at prices ranging from \$4,00 to \$12,000 — sold out. Rhona Hoffman had success with mid-priced work: She sold four wall pieces by **Jacob Hashimoto** that featured his characteristic layers of brightly colored kites, all in the \$60,000 range, as well as a photograph and two paintings by [\(/artists/207024-mickalene-thomas\)](/artists/207024-mickalene-thomas) **Mickalene Thomas** [\(/artists/207024-mickalene-thomas\)](/artists/207024-mickalene-thomas) for \$25,000 to \$55,000. In addition to a number of smaller sales, **Russell Bowman Art Advisory** sold a large canvas by local artist **Christina Ramberg** for \$175,000.

Six- and seven-figure deals were few. Zurich’s **Galerie Gmurzynska** sold a striking canvas awash in blue by [\(/artists/yves-klein-3462\)](/artists/yves-klein-3462) **Yves Klein** [\(/artists/yves-klein-3462\)](/artists/yves-klein-3462) for approximately \$1 million on opening night. Chicago’s **Richard Gray** also sold a work by [\(/artists/roy-lichtenstein-225\)](/artists/roy-lichtenstein-225) **Roy Lichtenstein** [\(/artists/roy-lichtenstein-225\)](/artists/roy-lichtenstein-225) ([recently the subject of a blockbuster retrospective at the city’s Art Institute](#) (<http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/803999/whaam-obsessive-compulsive-pop-artist-roy-lichtensteins-biggest-ever-retrospective-hits-chicago>)) for seven figures as well. Two sources said New York’s **Luhring Augustine** sold a more than six-foot-long multicolored canvas featuring printed designs by **Albert Oehlen** for over \$1 million, though the gallery declined to confirm.

“What we’re seeing is a cautious environment,” said one exhibitor, noting that Chicago’s economy is intimately tied to the price of corn and cattle. “I think those who are connected to Chicago as a port of trade and people who socialize with those people get enough of the sense of uncertainty that it is bound to have an effect. As goes the pork belly market, so goes the art market in Chicago.”

Even in good times, however, Midwestern collectors are slower to buy, dealers say. “Chicagoans are a little more cautious,” [dealer Sean Kelly said on opening night](#) (<http://blogs.artinfo.com/artintheair/2012/09/20/expo-chicago-kicks-off-with-hot-dogs-rahm-emanuel-and-tentative-sales/>). “But they always come through in the end.” The question, of course, is whether they come through frequently enough, and on pricey enough works, to keep blue-chip dealers coming back. Shearburn said he “wouldn’t want to be involved” if the fair failed to lure back international powerhouse dealers such as **Pace Gallery** and **David Zwirner**, both of which have been uncharacteristically quiet about sales at the fair.

Yet serving as a trading floor for seven-figure pieces isn’t necessarily Expo Chicago’s raison d’être, nor should it be, some dealers said. “Smaller, more regional fairs enable you to tap into a new client base that you might not see in London and Miami,” said New York’s **Christopher D’Amelio**. “You can’t call the same 500 people all the time. Here, you see the people who aren’t getting called.” And those people just might have an interesting point of view — not to mention money to spend. “There are a number of actual collectors here who do what they want rather than what they’re told to do,” said London’s **James Mayor**, who already has plans to return to Expo next year. “America deserves a proper fair, and I think the place for it is Chicago.”

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