

Chicago Contemporary & Classic

by Victor M. Cassidy

The new Chicago art exposition, dubbed **Chicago Contemporary & Classic (CC&C)**, opened last weekend on Navy Pier, Apr. 29-May 2, 2005. CC&C is an enterprise of **Pfingsten Partners** of Deerfield, Ill., a private equity firm whose International Art & Framing Group claims to be the world's number one producer of art shows and art publications. Its properties include **Art Miami**, which is directed by **Ilana Vardy**, who also created CC&C.

CC&C says it is "reinventing the way collectors can approach modern and contemporary art," primarily by combining dealers in art, antiques and decorative arts into a single fair. According to CC&C, this approach is "designed to reflect a new trend in 21st century collecting." But when we visited CC&C on its opening day, we found just one decorative arts dealer and no antiques.

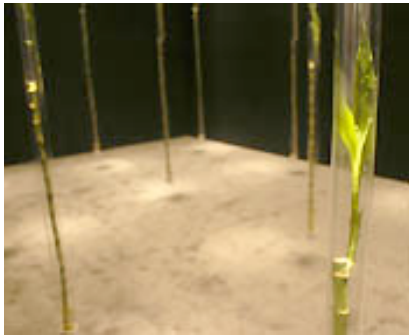
Though well-managed, CC&C is not particularly "innovative" -- and it does not reflect any new trends in collecting. Very likely, management abandoned its "innovative" concepts when art dealers balked. Earlier this year, several who had chosen to exhibit at **Art Chicago in the Park** told me that they rejected CC&C because they did not want to share space with antiques and decorative arts.

CC&C has more space than Art Chicago in the Park and (presumably) more money. The show accommodated installations, art magazines and nonprofit organizations, which made it feel like the art fairs we used to have on Navy Pier. Everything was calm and orderly at CC&C. In fact, the exposition hall was virtually deserted when we visited. Mostly of second and third rank, the galleries at CC&C exhibited a lot of decorative work and we struggled to find exciting art. The public art projects were rewarding, however.

Michele Brody and Feng Shui

When Vardy began to plan CC&C, she decided to have project spaces, and invited **Yankowitz & Holden** architects in New York to select the artists. They chose **Buzz Spector**, a sometime Chicagoan who now teaches at Cornell, **Dennis Oppenheim**, **Andrea Polli** and **Michele Brody**. Yankowitz & Holden also did an installation.

Spector's sweet trifle, titled *Panorama (Forest of Signs)* (2005), is three shelves lined with old postcards that run along the perimeter of the installation space. The artist cuts the cards to make silhouettes of trees and vegetation, but only a few of them actually depict nature. The artist says that the cards show urban scenes, monuments, vulgar jokes and the words of long-forgotten correspondents.



Michele Brody's untitled installation is comprised of 15 clear plastic tubes, suspended and lit from above, each containing a section of bamboo that has sprouted a branch and a leaf. There is nutrient-enriched water in the bottom of each tube and the bamboo, which gets artificial light from the spotlights, grows during the course of her show. This installation has an Oriental quality and the artist acknowledges Japanese and Minimalist influence.

Brody graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1994 and employed locally native prairie grass in her first living installation, calling it an "experiment in growth." She views nature as "watching time pass." Now living in New York, she has shown papyrus growing in tubes, stating that this was her way of taking art (i.e., paper) off the gallery walls.

Brody relates her CC&C installation to Feng Shui, the Chinese art of interior arrangement, and speaks of "lucky bamboo, a tubular plant within the tube." According to her, the tubed bamboo suggests nature being contained and flourishing within the urban environment.

Young and Old

Copenhagen's **Galerie Egelund** shows works by established artists and also has a branch, **Galerie Christoffer Egelund**, that features work by younger artists. At CC& C, the senior gallery had work by **Niels Strøbek**, a Danish realist painter who has a reputation in Scandinavia but is unknown in the U.S. Galerie Egelund also exhibited works by **Sam Francis** from 1994, the final year of his life.

One highlight at Galerie Christoffer Egelund was *GhostDance II* by **Christina Hamre**, a Danish artist who has just passed the age of 30. Hamre's brightly-colored mixed-media piece shows fantasy shoes and dancing figures surrounding a pattern with a horse at its center.

Aldo Castillo Gallery is one of seven Chicago participants in CC&C. Castillo, who specializes in Latino artists, showed a painted photo collage by **Marcos Raya**, a Mexican-born, Chicago-based painter and installation artist. *Raya as Frida* (2005) is a self-portrait doctored to evoke **Frida Kahlo**. Raya has made many such self-portraits and sometimes calls himself "Man Raya."

The **Gallery of Surrealism** from New York showed a huge collection of works, including **Victor Brauner's** 1962 engraving *Codex d'un Visage*. Evocative of maps and Mayan sculpture, Brauner's codex has four face forms drawn in simple outline with arms, bodies, and the trademark Brauner lips.

The Chicago gallery **Robert Henry Adams Fine Art** recently had an exhibition of works by **George Josimovich** (1894-1986), a Yugoslav-born artist who came to the U.S. as a young man and spent much of his life in Chicago. We liked his *Reclining Nude with Bottles* (1926), a Cubist painting with a Leger influence, particularly in the objects around the figure.

Gwen John (1876-1939), the celebrated sister of the even better-known painter **Augustus John**. Gwen is said to have had a fling with **Auguste Rodin**, and she wrote him several times daily during the height of their *liaison*, which may account for its brevity. During the 1920s, Gwen John lived in Meudon, a Paris suburb, and made many drawings in a church next door to her house. The London gallery **Browse & Darby** brought to the fair Gwen John's *Two Women in Church*, which was made at this time. The outlines are done in crayon with flat areas of gouache added in.

John favored a limited palette of subdued colors to which she assigned numbers. Some of her unfinished works have just the outline and numbers, which she planned to color over. The figures in *Two Women in Church* have an umber hat, a violet dress, sienna in the background, and a patch of pink on the cheeks.

Who Won?

With all the publicity about the "art fair" wars, it seems appropriate to ask whether Art Chicago in the Park or Chicago Contemporary & Classic won out. We declare a tie. Art Chicago has better galleries, but it needs improved management, a more commodious space and some of the trimmings that make an art fair memorable. CC&C badly needs better exhibitors. We await the sales reports.

VICTOR M. CASSIDY writes on art from Chicago.

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