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Dallas Art Fair

Cultivating culture

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DALLAS is known for its conservative manner, an obsession with American football and oil—not so much for its culture. But recently, that has been changing. Seven years ago, after doing the rounds at established art fairs in other American cities, Chris Byrne, a former gallerist, and John Sughrue, a real-estate developer, thought Dallas should have its own. So in 2009 the pair made their idea a reality with the inaugural [Dallas Art Fair](http://www.dallasartfair.com/) (<http://www.dallasartfair.com/>). Its fifth edition, held this year from April 12th to 14th, was the focus of the newly minted Dallas Arts Week.



In America art fairs have been used as a beacon to transform cities that are a dearth of culture into thriving art destinations. Miami, for example, turned from a cultural wasteland into a hotspot within a decade after Art Basel Miami Beach began in 2002. Now, each December, the city welcomes dealers, artists, collectors, museum directors, curators, celebrities and others from around the world looking to buy, sell and view art—along with the requisite partying.

The Dallas Art Fair might just do the same for the ninth-biggest city in America. Whereas Miami's fair inherited much of its kudos from Art Basel in Switzerland, Dallas wants to forge its own identity. "It has to be unique to us," insists Mike Rawlings, the local mayor. After all, Dallas has all the right ingredients—money, talent and institutions—needed to turn it into a thriving arts hub. "It is the opportunity to reach out to the rest of the cities across America and say that you can participate in this appetite we have for art," Mr Rawlings adds.

The numbers are good. The first fair attracted 37 exhibitors; this year there were 83 showing works in every media by modern and contemporary artists. San Francisco's Highlight gallery displayed digitally manipulated images of architecture by Filip Dujardin, a Belgian photographer; Houston's Moody gallery showed mirrored sculptures by Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz, an American duo; and New York's Marlborough Chelsea gallery had geometric canvases by Andrew Kuo, and American artist. Johannes Vogt, a gallerist from New York, decided to sign up after hearing about it from a previous fair-goer. "The reports from last year were very enthusiastic," he says. Twelve exhibitors were international, compared with only four last year. "It felt there was something happening here that we were keen to be a part of," says Paul Moss, co-founder of Workplace Gallery in Gateshead in northern England, who learned about the fair after meeting Mr Byrne and several Dallas-based collectors.



Many local institutions also held events as part of Dallas Arts Week. Artists Tobias Madison, Emanuel Rossetti and Stefan Tcherepnin opened "Drip Event", their water-filled installation at an experimental art space called the Power Station. The Nasher Sculpture Centre showed Surrealist sculptures by Los Angeles-based Nathan Mabry. Dallas Contemporary hosted four exhibitions: a fashion display by Walter Van Beirendonck, an avant-garde menswear designer; a wall featuring work by Soner, a graffiti artist; John Pomara's digital imagery; and Josephine Durkin's enchanting collages. Dan Rees, a British-born artist, debuted the fruits of his residency at the city's Goss-Michael Foundation, and the Dallas Museum of Art held its glitzy annual Art Ball.

One might argue that these efforts to cultivate an art scene in Dallas are pandering to the local moneyed collectors. Several people who live in the area said that the fair was not well-publicised to the public. "There is no question that Dallas is well-heeled and that the art community has money, and money helps," says Mr Rawlings.



But that doesn't mean the city isn't trying to reach out to a larger audience. Dallas Contemporary is one of the few institutions in America that operates in both English and Spanish, Texas's second language. The Dallas Museum of Art recently introduced an initiative to offer free general admission

on Martin Luther King Jr Day and also started a free friends program which encourages engagement through a points-and-rewards system.

Mr Rawlings kicked off Dallas Arts Week with a panel discussion (albeit an all-male Caucasian one) open to the public about how to foster a creative culture and make the city a destination for artists and creative thinkers. One panelist, Eric Steele of Aviation Cinemas, suggested that Dallas should move away from the “if you build it, they will come” mentality. The city has poured millions of dollars into building arts facilities such as the AT&T Performing Arts Centre (a \$354m project which was also privately funded). Instead, he suggested investing in artists themselves. Many are attracted to the city due to its low overheads compared to New York and Los Angeles, which make an artists’ life in Dallas less of a struggle. Seven young artists have even formed a collective called the Socialised Contemporary Artists Bureau.

Dallas knows there are several kinks that need to be worked out. “We have a long way to go, we’re just scratching the surface,” says Mr Rawlings. “That’s why we’re doing this arts week.” But a cultural buzz is certainly building in the city.