

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

ARTFORUM

Man with a Plan
Linda Yablonsky
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Left: Artist Randy Palumbo with dealers Kate Werble and Daniela Steinfeld. Right: Dealer Bill Powers.

IF I EVER GO TO EXPO CHICAGO AGAIN, I'll do it right. I'll ask Hans Ulrich Obrist to organize my itinerary. The peripatetic Serpentine Gallery curator's archives reside in the Windy City, and he knows the lay of that flat land. I had an outline of events, but who were the dealers hosting dinners? Where were the open houses and VIP gallery tours? Obrist would know the scoop. Meanwhile, I set out for the fair's fifth edition alone, save for my skimpy agenda.

I reached Navy Pier just in time for the September 22nd evening vernissage. Which was hours after many of Chicago's justifiably vaunted collectors had come and gone. Apparently, Larry and Marilyn Fields checked in, as did eight thousand other people. It didn't feel like that many but the hall is large and long.

Just past the entrance, where the BMW car with a paint job by Jeff Koons stood sentry, collectors David Frej and Nancy Lerner were concluding their purchase of a stunning new painting by William Pope.L from Susanne Vielmetter, who said she was doing well. The couple's own excitement was palpable. "We only came to Pope.L recently," Frej said, his eyes falling on a large painting by Sadie Benning. "It took us a long time to understand what William was doing," Lerner explained. "Then we met him, and now we've gotten to know him. And that's made all the difference."

Just goes to show: Even in a digital world, personal contact counts. But Pope.L wasn't there, so I looked for other artists who might be.

Hank Willis Thomas was upstairs, I heard, in a temporary office for his artists' super PAC For Freedoms, but I didn't see him. All was calm in the aisles as I perused a few booths; most had a generous portion of real estate and pleasant presentations of saleable art, mostly paintings. At Team, José Freire had an interesting, forty-three-year-old discovery named James Crosby, who was showing white canvas versions of fireman helmets by the early twentieth-century, African

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American inventor Garrett Morgan. Peres Projects had a cool, calm, and definitely collectible group of shaped, shredded and grooved paintings by Blair Thurman.. Jessica Silverman brought vaginal wall pieces by Judy Chicago, her “new” artist. Monique Meloche had a hit on her hands with portraits by—artist-to-watch-alert—Amy Sherald. At Daniel Templon, I learned about Senegalese artist Omar Ba, and then exchanged greetings with David Kordansky, who doubled down with the senior Sam Gilliam and Betty Woodman.

The Exposure sector gave “younger” galleries some, well, exposure, if you can call being relegated to the back of the hall being exposed. The Hole gallery was tucked in there. So was Kate Werble, looking good with 11R Gallery across the way. Bill Powers brought new paintings by the Irish charmer Genieve Figgis, who’s following Elizabeth Peyton’s current show at Gallery Met in New York with paintings inspired by the Metropolitan Opera’s *Roméo et Juliette*. One of them features a penis. Powers wondered how operagoers would take it. What’s an opera for, if not melodrama?

I headed for the VIP room. No drama, just Nespresso. And monitors displaying videos from Daata Editions, a platform for digital art commissioned by the British collectors Anita and Poju Zabłudowicz. Both were there with daughter Tiffany Zabłudowicz and Daata director David Gryn. I heard applause in the distance and went back to the fair to find the source.

Instead, I was distracted by the wooden cart by Chicago’s Carlos Rolón/Dzine laden with inexpensive consumer goods (soap, T-shirts, pillows, sunglasses) available from a street seller named Garland Gantt. Charmed, I bought a T-shirt emblazoned with an image of Prince.

I also enjoyed the nonprofit presentations—none more than Mexico City’s Casa Maud, where artist Anuar Maud was advertising a residency program—for collectors. The Chicago Artists Coalition featured an allover installation of palm trees, photographs, and floral wallpaper by Leonard Suryajaya, an artist from Indonesia in its residency program who brought his mother and aunt from home to wrap handmade fruit in the same floral wallpaper.

Somewhere in the hall, Palais de Tokyo president Jean de Loisy and Expo director Tony Karman were announcing a new initiative. Next September, the French museum will stage a popup institution in Chicago to coincide with Expo and the 2017 Chicago Architectural Biennial. That will be the first time a biennial and an Expo run concurrently. Gosh, I thought. Should I have waited a year?

It turned out that the ovation heard was for Karman, who was being knighted—yes, *knighted*—and given a medal to identify him as a Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres. I found him near a Rolls Royce (a fair sponsor) that was on view at the VIP reception, the medal pinned to his jacket. “It’s to recognize all the work I’ve done in Chicago with French cultural institutions,” Karman said, happily.

There did seem to be a lot of French people around. I was happy for him. As hunger was upon me, I was also delighted to see that the reception was really a food fair. One after another, some of Chicago’s better restaurants, including a hot dog specialist, were serving the most delicious hors d’oeuvres. Editor Stefano Cernuschi was thrilled. So was Pompidou Foundation curator Florence Derieux.

But dinner was coming up, a soiree for New York collector Beth Rudin DeWoody at the Peninsula Hotel. In its ballroom-sized lobby, dealer Marc Selwyn and artist Randy Palumbo were in a select group previewing “Whoville,” a capsule exhibition of Hairy Who works on loan from DeWoody. Which explains why the show was so many cuts above the usual hotel art. Indeed, it was fascinating.

During dinner, an email from Powers alerted me to party hosted by five Exposure galleries—Van Horn, 11R, Arcade, On Stellar Rays, and Werble—at the Rainbo Club, a hipster dive with great neon. It’s been a mainstay of Wicker Park since the 1930s. There was a line at the door

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when Palumbo and I arrived, and two deep around the horseshoe bar. Booths were packed. No one wanted to leave—too much atmosphere. Next morning at the fair, hangovers were visible. Except at the double booth where Peter Kilchmann and Italian furniture dealer Ugo Casati collaborated on a beautiful installation of art and design. But what sets Expo apart, really, is its excellent program of talks and panels. Dieter Roelstraete was leading one to introduce the next Documenta, which begins April in Athens. The Greek artist Angelo Plessas was speaking. Renaissance Society director and chief curator Solveig Øvstebø was in the audience. So was Leonardo Bigazzi, producer and curator of the Lo Schermo dell'Arte Film Festival in Florence. "I came for the curatorial forum," he told me. What forum? That was my first wind of a symposium organized by the fair. Obrist must be there, I thought. MCA Chicago chief curator Michael Darling was, and offered to walk me through his Kerry James Marshall retrospective, soon to open at the Met Breuer after the curators' luncheon.

I didn't get lunch, but the next few hours were some of the happiest of my life in art. The Marshall show is nothing short of electrifying. And the museum was filled with people—

students, families, and visiting collectors like Karlheinz Essl, whose private museum is in Vienna.

From there, I hopped a shuttle to the Art Institute of Chicago, where Ann Goldstein was two weeks into the job of deputy director and chief curator. As we began a walk through the galleries displaying works representing an extraordinary gift to the museum from collectors Stefan Edlis and Gael Neeson, who should appear but Obrist! Indeed, he had the skinny on upcoming events, including the talk he would give the next morning at the Institute's school with artist Joseph Grigely, the person looking after Obrist's publications archive. He was inviting us to come when Stedelijk Museum director Beatrix Ruf walked in.

With Jack Pierson, Ruf would be the third member of a panel on Mark Morrisroe that I was to moderate at the fair. But right now all we had to do was ooh and ahh at the stellar Institute's galleries. All I can say is, collectors in Chicago have enormous civic pride—and an eye for some of the greatest art of the past sixty years.

Still flushed with the pleasures of the MCA and AIC, I headed out to Ukrainian Village, where Meloche and her husband Evan Boris were hosting a pizza-and-prosecco party for artists and visiting curators. This was cool. I stupidly passed up the pizza in favor for the big bash of a buffet dinner that dealer Kavi Gupta was throwing at mk The Restaurant.

It wasn't really a buffet. Two cooks, one each at a table on different sides of the room, slowly sauteed a bit of pasta or fish taco for guests who waited in line up to forty-five minutes before they could eat. The upside was that the wait encouraged conversation with one's neighbors in line. I drew great company: MCA director Madeleine Grynsztejn, former Kitchen director Debra Singer, and artists Kathryn Andrews and Glenn Kaino, who once studied with a magician. "Magic," he said, in the takeaway line of the night, "is the gap-filler between science and art."

Upstairs, where artist McArthur Binion was engaged with collectors who had just bought paintings from his show at Gupta, Cernuschi and Derieux had a table next to Willis Thomas. Only then did I hear about the gigantic For Freedoms balloon drop he'd engineered at Expo's vernissage. Viewers stomped on them. Thousands of them. To people elsewhere at Navy Pier, it sounded like fireworks. Or gunfire.

Next morning, I went to Stony Island Arts Bank, the research library, archive, and exhibition space created by Theaster Gates in a building on the South Side that otherwise would have fallen to ruin. It's mighty impressive—and only one of several reclamation projects sponsored by his Rebuild Foundation. Rebuild director and Gates studio's administrative director showed me around. The studio takes up an entire block. But this is what artists can do, and have, outside overdeveloped and expensive cities like New York.

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It was an unseasonably balmy day, full of sun. Lakeshore Drive was at a standstill. By the time I reached Expo, the standing-room-only audience for writer Sarah Thornton's interview with Marshall had spilled into the hall. "He gave me the most illuminating interview I've ever had," Thornton told me as Pierson, Ruf, and I mounted the stage to take our turn.

Afterward, we had nothing to do—but we had Obrist to save the day. He lead our group—it now included Swiss Institute director Simon Castets, Glasgow International director Sarah McCrory, and For Your Art founder Bettina Korek—to the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, which is in a magnificent Gold Coast house. Founded by Daniel Burnham, and now lead by Sarah Herda, it's devoted

mainly to architecture—and has a topnotch architecture-related bookshop. On view in the galleries was "Every Building in Baghdad," a show of fascinating photographs of the Iraqi capital in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s from the Rifat Chadirji archive in the Arab Image Foundation. Beautiful stuff.

It made us hungry again. Fortunately, the Pump Room at the Public Hotel was a few minutes' walk away. Only Ruf and Obrist were invited to Karman's Rolls Royce dinner. The rest of made our own fun, and had a good time doing it. And, like tourists recounting adventures taken and missed, we talked about art.

Funnily, its market never came up.