

What To Buy At Expo Chicago

BY SCOTT INDRISEK | SEPTEMBER 23, 2016



Manageable in scale and diverse in scope, the 5th edition of [Expo Chicago](#) proves itself to be a steadfast and reliable stop on the international art fair circuit. The Navy Pier plays host to a diverse roster of galleries, from heavy hitters like Paul Kasmin, Pace, Perrotin, and hometown favorite Kavi Gupta, to relative upstarts like Half Gallery, Mier, and Roberto Paradise. While truly radical surprises might be rare here, Expo also isn't pandering to a sedate and unadventurous collector class. (That said, certain stale repetitions abound: Everyone hawking the same derivation of Mel "Blah Blah Blah" Bochner, I'm looking at you.)

Near the entrance, Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects gets things off to a good start, clustering together a powerhouse of women artists: An oversized, all-white bust by Nicole Eisenman ("Sleeping Frat Guy," 2013) keeps company with witchy paintings by Ellen Berkenblit, a portrait by Nicola Tyson, and a flashy illuminated sign by Andrea Bowers extolling the need for free education. Team Gallery brings a handful of small gouache studies by Stanley Whitney, a stark counterpoint to his ultra-vibrant abstractions on canvas, and a more accessible way-in to acquire an artist whose star has continued to rise in the wake of a major Studio Museum in Harlem exhibition.

Several galleries take advantage of their booths to mount cohesive environments. Bortolami pairs smoke-and-soot-on-wood "paintings" by Claudio Parmiggiani (including a massive, multi-paneled, ghostly outline of a bookshelf) with mixed-media sculptures by Nicolas Guagnini, like a bulbous anatomical glazed ceramic resting atop a monograph of [Paul Cezanne](#) and a charred-looking wooden plinth. Carrie Secrist Gallery has created an immersive room for abstract painter Shannon Finley, whose geometric-psychedelic motifs are echoed in patterns that spill across the walls and floor. The Chicago Artists Coalition has an installation by emerging artist [Leonard Suryavaya](#), featuring paper sculptures of furniture and fruit along with absurdly surreal photographic portraits.

A joint booth from Casati Gallery and Galerie Peter Kilchmann accomplishes an admirable feat: Carving out a little bubble of chic domesticity within the typically overwhelming and impersonal atmosphere of a fair. The former dealer contributes furniture and design items, while the latter brings accompanying artworks. They're arranged in juxtapositions that let you imagine what it might like to be that exceedingly uncommon combo: rich *and* tasteful. (I'm coveting a circa 1954 writing desk by Franco Albini that is joined here by a Hernan Bas painting — louche young man smoking, exotic bird — and a delicately tiny canvas by Francis Alys.)

Anthony Meier Fine Arts also evinces a fine eye for understated arrangements, showing work that all has a strong sense of texture and materiality. Gareth Mason's violently forceful ceramics make sense with Mark Hagen's acrylic-on-burlap patterned abstraction and a baby-blue Donald Moffett. Matthew Marks Gallery is another stand-out, playing with scale and mixing the understated with the in-your-face. A stunning photorealist painting of two coins by Paul Sietsema hangs near two small resin sculptures (of a rat, and the Virgin Mary), by Katharina Fritsch, but the booth's focal point is another Fritsch piece: A hulking ink-and-acrylic-on-plastic reproduction of the Chicago skyline, a slice of kitsch rendered cool by context.

Roberto Paradise Gallery — a San Juan, Puerto Rico outfit that, full disclosure, is [currently showing a series of cat paintings by yours truly down on the island](#) — brings paintings by Sean Gannon and hyper-realistic, labor-intensive sculptures by Chris Bradley to Expo. (The former are pared-down, fleshy abstractions that depict bodies turned into landscapes — however sexualized they read depends on your own dirty mind. *Pervert.*)

The highlight of Mier Gallery's nearby booth is a set of paintings done on mirrored foil by Danish artist Peter Bonde, a one-time collaborator of Jason Rhoades and Paul McCarthy who hadn't shown in the States for decades until the Los Angeles dealer gave him a recent solo. At Chicago's Andrew Rafacz, two painters are worth your attention: Justin John Greene, who contributes an oddly moving, cartoonish portrait of a young man checking his cell phone in a fancy apartment; and Tracy Thomason, whose mixed-media canvases (oil, marble dust, activated charcoal) recall a more intimate detour from the legacy of Peter Halley and Donald Moffett.

As for Expo's best solo presentation, that honor has to go to Peres Projects, which is showing shaped canvases by Blair Thurman. They're each over six feet tall, and illuminated by a series of bare, eye-stinging florescent lights set into the booth's walls. Abstract in form, they hint toward the figurative — I personally saw the outlines of consumer packaging, film reels, dentist's tools, windows, aerial tangles of highways, vaginal intimations. I love how unnerving they are, and the way they must simultaneously court and repel the average collector — these sculpted objects, flashy and easy at first glance, yet so deeply, and proudly, strange.