

FRONTROW

AN UP-CLOSE VIEW OF CHICAGOLAND'S ENTERTAINMENT SCENE



"Out of Breath II" by Xenia Hausner, represented by Forum Gallery. The work is expected to be part of the show, now at Merchandise Mart.

Still art, still Chicago

Despite controversy, this weekend's expo is a go. We have some questions of our own—and the answers for those planning to attend

By Alan G. Artner
Tribune art critic

The dust is still settling, but it appears that Art Chicago 2006 will indeed take place.

After a week of uncertainty and a change to a new venue, Chicago's longest-running contemporary art exposition will go on more or less as planned on the eighth floor of the Merchandise Mart.

For those wondering what's happening:

Last year's competition to become the reigning spring art fair in Chicago was won by Thomas Blackman Associates, Inc., which began more than a decade ago mounting its shows in a tent. The show spent years at Navy Pier, and in 2005 went back to a tent once more.

This year, union and financial problems threatened the existence of the Art Chicago fair. But on Tuesday night, organizer Thomas Blackman promised the curtain still would rise. Has he again defeated the odds?

Beyond immediate problems, Art Chicago is attempting to sustain interest in a phenomenon with an American history that started here and — to our detriment — spread to several other cities. Its future, like that of many another venerable cultural institution, will depend on an audience comprised of members not yet born when it began. So we introduce the wobbly 2006 installment by putting ourselves in the place of a prospective viewer and answering some of the questions that have been most often asked of us during the fair's history.

► What is it?

An annual trade show that has been mounted in Chicago by several different organizers for 26 years. In it, a large group of professional international art dealers offers works for sale by primarily modern (circa 1850-1950) and contemporary (circa 1950 to present) artists. Three such fairs took place concurrently in 1998; last year there were two. Art Chicago 2006 is the 14-year-old survivor seeking to reinvent itself after high-powered European and American galleries have moved on to other fairs in Switzerland, Miami and New York.

► How does it differ from summer art fairs?

The underlying concepts are the same in all of them: to show and sell works of art. But despite the last-minute relocation, Art Chicago is

ART CHICAGO 2006

When: 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday and 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Mondays

Where: Eighth floor of Merchandise Mart, between Wells and Orleans Streets

Tickets: \$15, \$25 for two-day pass, \$35 for three-day pass. Contact 312-226-4700 or www.artchicago.com

Double deal with the Chicago Antiques Fair: The open-to-the-public fair also is taking place on the Mart's eighth floor this weekend; your \$15 admission will get you into both.

expected to have patently better presentation than the street fairs, a larger range of work (from established masters to emerging and untested artists), more consistent interest (the contemporary works are not just created by living artists but engage in the artistic dialogues of our time) and the participation of galleries that in many instances have developed reputations for choosing the work they show.

► What is the range of the work exhibited, in time period and cost?

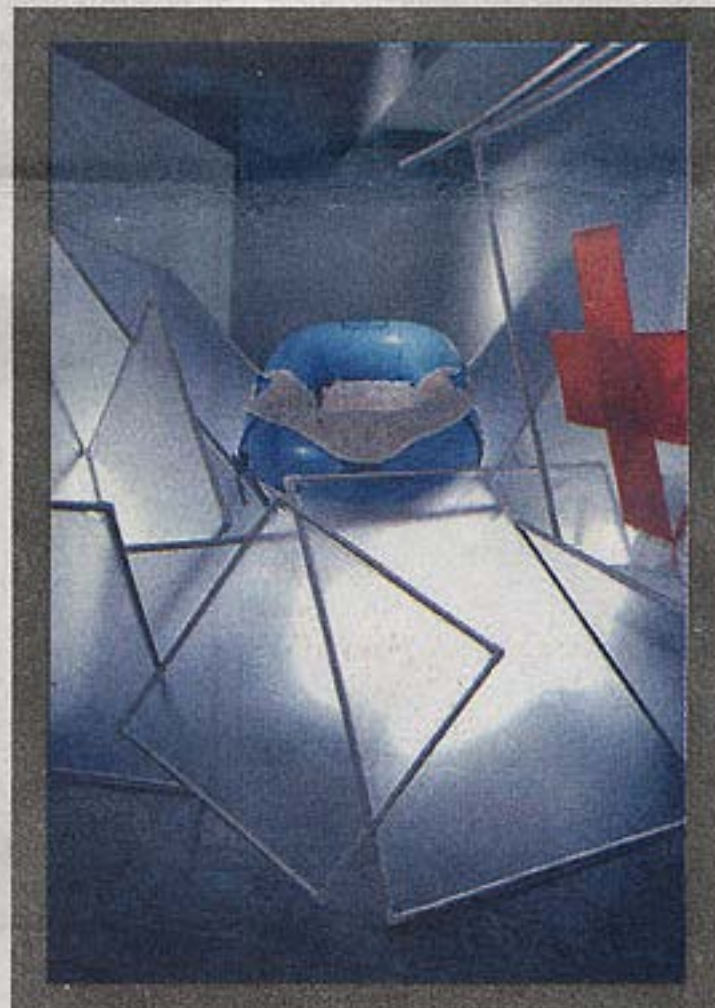
"From art that was made last week to hundreds of years old," says Blackman. But the majority dates after 1980. The range in price is from about \$250 (for prints and other works on paper) to works in the millions of dollars (paintings, sculptures, new media).

► How were participating galleries chosen?

From applications reviewed by a committee of dealers (six this year) that occasionally will submit names of galleries thought likely to do well here. There are about 100 galleries from around the world, although less than a third this year from overseas. More than 2,000 artists are represented.

► What's new this year?

The uncertainty, for one thing. Will everything be together on time? How many of the announced exhibitors have lost patience and dropped out? Will the public find its way to the new venue? How will the original plans for the tent in Butler Field translate to the Mart? (In Grant Park, more booths were set aside for special projects and discussions; additional programs were to take place in the mornings and evenings, and the extra space promised easier navigation. A pavilion was supposed to have been devoted to Korean art. An art-related day



"Inter-Glacial Free Trade Agency Inflatable Fur-Lined Star Gazing Lifeboat" by Lynn Richardson. About 100 galleries from around the world are expected to take part.

care facility was planned to allow parents to view art without the kids. Evening programs were to spotlight other Chicago arts institutions such as Redmoon Theater and the new facility of the Hyde Park Art Center. Will any of this now happen?)

► Does Nova cut into part of what Art Chicago previously did, or is it complementary?

Art Chicago was scheduled to incorporate younger galleries in an invitational section contiguous with the kind of young art once shown off-site in what Blackman called "The Stray Show." Nova presents all new work from young galleries as well as collectives and artists' groups.

► If not a purchase, what should viewers come away with?

"Two purchases," Blackman says. "No, really. I hope they come away excited about an artist, a artwork or the art market in general. It's a great way to look at a lot of art in a short period of time. It's an opportunity to feel comfortable in looking at art, and I hope [new viewers] will give it a try."