



How to attend an art fair

Fog Design + Art, Untitled San Francisco shape a week of visual art in San Francisco

By Charles Desmarais
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January is art fair season in San Francisco, when two major expositions that draw collectors from outside the region generate enough energy to raise the temperature in art galleries all across the city.

If the primary art exhibitions in the Bay Area will always be presented by the museums — who have the depth of expertise, space and other resources to organize major projects — galleries often provide the excitement that can come from nimble small businesses that risk their own money, make quick decisions and are guided by practiced instinct as often as by scholarship.

And then there's the matter of mission. It should go without saying, but it's often easy to forget that museums are primarily educational, even scholarly institutions, while galleries serve an essential market function.

In Southern Florida, the art fair known as Art Basel Miami Beach drew competition and spawned so many ancillary projects that an entire week of events throughout the region has come to be called, for short, Basel Miami. (Not to be confused with Basel Basel, the bonkers nickname for the original Art Basel fair in Switzerland.)

So, too, the week of gallery events in San Francisco is often colloquially referred to simply as Fog, not for the area's frequent weather pattern but after the art fair that started it all five years ago, Fog Design and Art. Here's what to expect:

What is an art fair?

The expo that styles itself Fog Design + Art is one of hundreds of such events that have proliferated in recent decades. The fair most of the others emulate, Art Basel, began in 1970. Ten years later, Art Chicago premiered on

that city's Navy Pier as the first North American fair on the Basel model. Fairs have come and gone and morphed over the years since then (Chicago's went defunct and was replaced by another), but the field has exploded overall.

There are, by one publication's count, more than 60 major international fairs — and that does not include every village and beach town that puts on an "arts and crafts fair" with makers tending their booths. In the international art world context, a fair is an exposition where professional art galleries, generally vetted for the quality of their programs by committees of experts, fit out rented booth spaces to present small temporary exhibitions of works by the artists they represent.

What fairs will be in the Bay Area in January?

There are two that have established themselves as the primary expositions. Both present extensive programs of seminars and other events on art and collecting. Visit their websites for full schedules. As in past years, a few pop-up events may also appear around the Bay Area at the same time.

Fog Design + Art

Fog makes its sixth appearance at Fort Mason Center for Arts and Culture, Jan. 17-20, with a preview gala on Wednesday, Jan. 16, to benefit the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

The fair has been widely praised as refreshingly different from the norm. Scrupulously limiting the number of galleries to lessen burnout (this year there are 53; some fairs have five times that number), Fog distributes invited dealers evenly between those specializing in contemporary art and those devoted to high-design furniture and objects. Carpeted, well-lighted and comfortably appointed, Fort Mason's Festival Pavilion never looks better through the rest of the year.

11 a.m.-7 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, Jan. 17-19; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 20. \$25. Fort Mason Festival Pavilion, 2 Marina Blvd., S.F. 415-745-3315. www.fogfair.com

Untitled Art, San Francisco



Turiya Magadla, *Thula besengiqalile ukulungisa izinto II*, 2017, Nylon and cotton pantyhose on canvas, 120 x 120 cm

This one seems to be finding solid ground after a peripatetic start. Pier 35 is the fair's third venue in as many years, but organizers recently announced a long-term agreement to return to the Embarcadero for the foreseeable future.

San Francisco's Jenkins Johnson Gallery will exhibit this work by the South African artist Turiya Magadla at Untitled San Francisco in January. It is made of nylon and cotton pantyhose and sealant on canvas.

Running Jan. 18-20, Untitled plans to present 55 international exhibitors from 10 countries this year. Creature comforts have been lower on the priority list at Untitled, but what it lacked in amenities it made up for with a livelier selection of dealers devoted exclusively to contemporary art.

Noon-8 p.m. Friday, Jan. 18; noon-6 p.m. Saturday-Sunday, Jan. 19-20. \$25-\$35; free for children age 12 and younger. Pier 35, 1454 The Embarcadero, S.F. 646-405-6942. www.untitledartfairs.com/san-francisco

Do the galleries make money?

Art fairs are very big business, but it's the fairs that often reap the profits. Some charge as much as \$100,000 for a prime booth at an event that lasts no more than three or four days. Add to that the cost to galleries of building out their booths, shipping the art (even local transport can run into thousands of dollars), staff salaries (and, for out-of-town dealers, travel and hotel costs) and entertaining top clients.

Most galleries who want to compete nationally or internationally have little choice these days but to participate in art fairs, which are seen by collectors as a mark of their prominence. It is widely accepted, though, that only the biggest names make much more than a modest profit. Many gallerists, when they are being honest, admit they are relieved to cover their costs and meet a few people who might become future customers.

Why would I go if I don't plan to buy?

That's a very good question. Art fairs can seem overwhelming, with hundreds of works of art spread across acres of former warehouse space. And every booth seems to have at least three attendants looking to sell something.

Museum exhibitions generally have far more contextual information, with wall texts, videos, docents and other didactic aides. Galleries don't charge admission, and the pace is nearly always more relaxed.

On the other hand, art fairs usually have an energy all their own, and it's fun to think that you could buy anything on display in this gigantic candy store if you had the money — and if someone else doesn't beat you to it.

An art fair is a great place to experience, in just a few hours, the diversity and excitement of a certain part of the art world.

Would I feel out of place?

Dealers know that some of the wealthiest people dress down. The rich can get away with stuff that others might not. And collectors can be a quirky lot, in any case.

Still, your best bet to be taken seriously is to go to a fair in "business casual" attire (not a gala — that's different). A collared shirt, clean jeans and decent sneakers (you will do a great deal of walking) are all you really need.

You won't be ridiculed for asking questions — quite the opposite. All those booth attendants need something to do, and they will be full of the information that might otherwise have been on that missing wall text. Just don't interrupt them when they are with a client.

What other art events will be in the Bay Area from Jan. 16 to 20?

At least 25 of the top galleries in the Bay Area will put their best foot forward during the week of Fog and Untitled, when many collectors will be coming to town. Check out the Datebook listings and my roundup of reviews throughout the month.