

## Ninth Annual Boston International Fine Art Show: Classy, Hip, and Hopeful

by Jeanne Schinto

We knew it was going to be a good event even before we got there. Driving to the gala preview of the Boston International Fine Art Show on November 10 (the weekend event was November 10-13, 2005), we recognized the voice of Tony Fusco on WCRB radio. Fusco, cofounder and co-producer of the show, had recorded his own advertisement for the exhibition of 40 dealers of art, old and new. Irrational as it may seem, our chance hearing of the spot on one of Boston's classical music stations made us feel we were heading for a kind of happening. It turned out to be not so irrational after all.

The Sky Tracker searchlights, crisscrossing the night sky over Boston's South End, led us to the Cyclorama, a building completed in 1884 with a circular floor plan that's ideal for an art show and roving party like the one we were about to enter. Around the corner from the building's main doors is the portal to an indoor parking lot, still considered a luxurious convenience in this neighborhood that until a couple of years ago had more than a few ragged edges.

On that same block behind the Cyclorama, there used to be a Boston police precinct. Now that antique structure has been gutted. In its place high-end condominiums will be installed. Yet more condos? Yes, except that these are being designed by French architect Philippe Starck, who also designed the Delano, an ultrastylish, hip hotel in Miami Beach, which we once visited briefly as an interloper before making our way back to our noisy hostel.

Inside the Cyclorama a large crowd had assembled for the ninth annual art show—the only all-art show in New England. The jazz was live. The fashionable food was plentiful. Carts of sushi rolled past us. On another cart, a whole rare tuna would be cut paper thin for a tiny sandwich as you waited. Later in the evening other carts came laden with iced cookies, brownies, and little cakes.

Our report lingers on the food before moving on to the art because we think it's important. So do Fusco and his cofounder and co-producer, Robert Four. When asked by Wang Center events manager Maria Nardella what she could do to make this gala the best one ever, Fusco unhesitatingly said, "Good food and lots of it." (The food was Nardella's responsibility because the gala's beneficiary traditionally hires the caterer for this event, and that beneficiary this time was Nardella's employer, the Wang Center for the Performing Arts, specifically its education programs, Suskind Young At Arts.) "Food makes a party last longer," said Fusco, "because the people will stay longer," increasing the chances that purchases will be made. "And the dealers won't complain to me about it all weekend," he added, smiling.

So, is all there is to producing a successful show the hiring of a caterer as skilled as MAX Ultimate Food? If only, MAX was the caterer for the now-defunct Boston Antiques & Fine Art Show, a benefit for the Boys and Girls Clubs of Boston for the last 18 years. MAX couldn't save it from oblivion. You may remember we reported a few months ago that show promoter Meg Wendy had vowed to continue it even after the Boys and Girls Clubs pulled out. She has since changed her mind and announced her decision in a letter to her dealers.

This party was a hit. As Carey L. Vose, showing here as Vose Contemporary Realism, a division of the 165-year-old Vose Galleries of Boston, which her great-great-grandfather began, said, "The gala was the best party I've been to all year." It's a significant statement coming from a woman in her early thirties. But after the party came the business of art.

Most immediately noticeable and significantly characteristic of the art as a whole was its widely, almost wildly, divergent price range. It ran from \$950 all the way to \$950,000, which comes to almost \$1 million with 5% Massachusetts sales tax.

David Major and Katrina Thompson of Spanierman Gallery, New York City, brought that priciest piece. In fact, there were two at that price level in their booth, Eastman Johnson's portrait of an ice skater and William MacGregor Paxton's portrait of a woman reading. The lowest price we recorded, for an original oil by a well-recognized artist, was \$4500. That was the price of a 9" x 6 1/2" Puerto Rico view in an original Thulin frame by Hermann Dudley Murphy from The Cooley Gallery, Old Lyme, Connecticut.

To have found art priced any lower, one needed to look at the Art Deco, WPA, and Modernist prints and works on paper being sold by Fusco and Four, who are dealers as well as promoters; or at contemporary art in one of a dozen other booths besides Vose Contemporary Realism: or at the few contemporary works brought by some of the old-art dealers. Spanierman, for example, had two by Kate Lehman (b. 1968), priced at \$3400 and \$3200, and one by Sarah Lamb (b. 1971) at \$5000. (A second Lamb piece from Spanierman Gallery was \$15,000.)

The artworks were nearly as diverse as their prices, ranging from Corot and Courbet to John Frederick Kensett to Elaine de Kooning to the painters of Boston's North Shore. A less obvious fact was the lack of clash or conflict of interest among dealers with such different markets in mind and who were operating more or less on parallel universes.

"It works because all their needs are the same," said Fusco, naming these basic necessities: "People who appreciate fine art, who have some level of discretionary income; a venue that is conducive to the sales process, that looks good, has good lighting, wall-to-wall carpeting, and good wall covering." (And we'll add one more, which the Cyclorama has, wide aisles.) Finally, as Spanierman's David Major said, "True appreciators of art can appreciate all forms."

We asked Gerold M. Wunderlich, a director of Gerald Peters Gallery, New York City, how he had chosen what to bring to this show, which he had tried back in 1997 and 1998 and was trying again. "A diverse show brings in a great variety of people," he said. "Back at the gallery, we are currently doing a Robert Henri exhibit." He brought no Henri works to Boston. "When we do a venue like this, we try to be a little more diverse and also try to be a little more diverse in our price range. It starts around twenty thousand and goes up to three hundred thousand. Our target price is over a hundred thousand."

In hanging the show, Wunderlich ignored the price contours and followed the logic of the art. "I started with very traditional on the left side and went all the way to more Modernist on the right side. There is a rhyme and reason. I didn't put nineteenth-century art next to Milton Avery. We wanted to have a progression."

So how did the dealers do? Wunderlich and his associate, Reagan Upshaw, sold a single painting over the weekend. They were not disappointed and will return next year, they told Fusco. Donna Heinley of Boston, who had Corots and Courbets in her booth, sold \$80,000 worth of art and will also return, she said. Blake Benton of Levin Benton Fine Art, Boston, whose central focus is mid-century abstraction—"wacky modernism," in his words—sold four pieces. Blue Heron Interiors of Cohasset, Massachusetts, sold all of its White Mountains paintings, including a pair by Benjamin Champney.

David Hall, owner of David Hall Fine Art, Dover, Massachusetts, sold ten paintings—mainly New England artists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. "Luckily I'm local because I had to go home and replenish," he said. He wasn't boasting. His price points were admittedly modest, and half of those sales were to other dealers, who may well do better than he did when they resell the works.

Then there was the news that Fusco reported to us. "One high-end gallery, while it did not sell at the show, told me that they were pleased with the number of potential clients they met and had picked up a major consignment as a result of being at the show."

Therefore, one's total number of sales at the show is not always the best way to measure success here; there is follow-up to consider. Two of Donna Heinley's sales came in the week after the show. Marty Gleason of Gleason Fine Art, Boothbay Harbor, Maine, said, "Often after a show like this, people have taken measurements of the larger pieces, and we'll hear from them." Expectations have to be attuned to all those things, said Patrick Dawson, managing director of Birnam Wood Galleries, New York City and East Hampton, New York. "After USArts in Philadelphia we sold two works to people who had been to the show. That happens to us often. Here, even if I sold twenty paintings, it might be a successful show or it might be a fluke."

It's not a well-kept secret that Bostonians buy at a pokey pace. You've heard of a New York minute. Try a Boston one. Unlike Dawson, some New York City dealers who have done this show in the past could not abide that pokey pace, and those dealers are gone. "Or else they just weren't comfortable outside of their New York skins," as a colleague of theirs put it.

Fusco, accustomed to hearing from dealers who have had very diverse selling experiences at this show, expressed his market philosophy this way: "I'm always disappointed if any of my dealers don't do well, but I'm not surprised. That's the nature of the business. The dealers who take a longer view of it and who are trying to establish themselves in Boston understand that it does take time."

He used Gladwell & Company of London as a prime example. "They sold only a couple of paintings this time, but still they said as they were leaving, 'We'll see you next year.' They have done the show for seven years and have had other good years here. Besides, they are now seeing Bostonians on vacation showing up at their gallery in London. It's always been their intention to have a satellite market in Boston, and now they do. It takes a certain level of understanding."

"Showing here is like a living advertisement," Fusco continued, noting that, while both rents run an average of \$4500 to \$6500, the most recent one-third-page ad he took out in Art & Auction magazine cost \$4207.50. "And many of these dealers take out full-page ads in magazines every month."

Who coined the phrase reality minus expectations equals happiness? "What were my expectations going into the show?" one dealer asked, repeating our question. "Frankly, we expected to see a lot of people, and it's been a little thin this year. That's my one complaint. A reason for us to leave our gallery and be here in November is to see new faces."

Perceptions can deceive. Actually, according to Steven Biel that was up by 500 over last year. Several other dealers praised the crowd for its increased volume and its quality. We spoke to collector and committee member John P. Axelrod of Boston at the party, as well as Erica Hirschler, a curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, who is also a committee member, it's true, but we saw her again on Saturday when she made a return visit. Others reported to us that they saw Theodore Stebbins, curator at the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University, and Esta and Robert Epstein, who are on the board of the Wang Center and are collectors of contemporary art, including works by Ellsworth Kelly.

We did not attend Young Collectors Night because we're not young, although we heard that the talk by Missy Sullivan, editor of the Forbes Collector, had to be repeated because the initial one was a sellout. Her topic was "What Every Smart Collector Should Know."

"Young Collector Night wound up driving a young audience in all weekend because they made return visits," said Fusco, adding that next year he's changing the name of that event to New Collectors Night. "Someone called and said, 'I'm fifty. Can I attend?'" Fusco said yes. "With the name change we are hoping it will be more welcoming."

We did attend one of several programs that were peppered over the weekend, which were increased in number since last year. Our choice this time was the panel discussion on early Saturday evenings, "Crossing Borders: Art in an International Context." It was sponsored by the Canadian Consulate General in Boston and featured dealers who export new art from Canada, Russia, and Central America. It was followed by a reception, which the Canadians treated. Their offerings were a fine spread of French wines, patés, and cheeses.

On Sunday there was an author appearance by Steven Biel that we were sorry to miss. Biel, director of the Humanities Center at Harvard, wrote *American Gothic: A Life of America's Most Famous Painting*.

After the show closed on Sunday, we thought more about it from the buyer's point of view. It's "visually challenging," to use the phrase of Shelley Brown of Blue Heron Interiors. But how much more congenial can any venue get? And we doubt we're alone in finding it less intimidating than a gallery visit, where a quick, graceful exit isn't always possible if one doesn't like the art or the prices. And if it's true that financial advisors are increasingly recommending to investors that they buy a little diversifying art, what better way for neophytes to learn about a huge variety of possible art purchases than at an exhibition like this one?

For the dealers, an all-art show is more competitive than one where they are exhibiting with dealers of antiques, especially since potential buyers can comparison shop so easily. But there are advantages. At this point in history, one dealer said. "Frankly, I prefer to be showing only with art dealers because none of the negativity of the furniture dealers is here." Also, as Shelley Brown said, although she feels comfortable at either a mixed show or an all-art show, she enjoys the freedom that comes with a show like this one that allows her to bring art of any era.

There is yet another advantage, according to Brown's husband, Jim Puzinas. "It's invigorating to be exposed to different kinds of art. Even though you may specialize in certain periods and certain schools, being here forces your knowledge out a little further." He noted that just across the aisle from him and Brown was Lazare Gallery of Charles City, Virginia, representing the Moscow school of Russian realism.

Blue Heron Interiors is one of those dealers who no longer have the Boys and Girls Clubs of Boston venue. There was speculation at this show that the loss of that show would be a gain for Fusco and Four, since dealers from the now-defunct show would be looking to join up with this one. As the reputation of this show grows, so does its waiting list.

Which isn't to say that dealers don't turnover, that scheduling conflicts don't arise, and that business decisions of other kinds don't cause dealers to give up their spots—only that there wasn't space as we wrote this shortly before Thanksgiving. There may be space after the new contracts have gone out in March. By then, the charity for 2006 will have been chosen. "This year, three nonprofit organizations vied for the chance to be our beneficiary," said Fusco. "Choosing a different one each time gives us an opportunity to continue introducing the show to new audiences."

For more information, contact Fusco and Four at (617) 363-0405; Web site ([www.FineArtBoston.com](http://www.FineArtBoston.com)).