

Boston, Massachusetts

The Boston International Fine Art Show Reaches Age Ten

by Jeanne Schinto

Don't try to define the Boston International Fine Art Show by the type of art for sale. The wares of the 40 exhibitors who participated in the tenth anniversary event, at the Cyclorama at the Boston Center for the Arts, November 9-12, 2006, were equally split between traditional and contemporary works of art. The price levels were, likewise, varied— high, low, and in between. In the booth of Spanierman Gallery, New York City, we saw icon Georgia O'Keeffe's *Spring Tree, No. II*, an oil on canvas dated 1945, for \$1.8 million. Vose Contemporary Realism, Boston, offered living artist Michael Theise's modest (4" x 4") *Apple Slice* for \$1400. ProArte Gallery, Miami and New York City, brought a Willem de Kooning charcoal priced at \$60,000.

So what does unify this show and enable it to succeed? Like an artwork, it's ruled by its own logic. That's one possibility. But there's also just plain common sense being applied by its founding co-creators, Tony Fusco and Robert Four.

We caught up with Fusco after the show, which he and Four not only promote but also participate in as exhibitors Fusco & Four of Boston, specializing in American and European 20th-century works. We think the audience is getting used to the fact that we're not just one kind of art," Fusco said. "At other shows around the country that are just one kind, they lose so many people. And in a market the size of Boston I don't think we could afford to do that. So we want to be inclusive. Having fifty-fifty traditional and contemporary is how we want to keep it. We think it's working, that it's a good balance. We're also making a conscious effort to choose dealers at all price points. I don't think Boston can support the kind of show where every exhibitor has got six-figure paintings."

The choice of the Cyclorama in Boston's South End as the show's venue has been key. The space has a circular floor plan and great lighting. Fusco & Four covers the brick floor with plush wall-to-wall carpeting and its booth walls with colored fabric, not paper. Sixty feet up, there is the Cyclorama's dome, which acts as a huge skylight during the day. Below it is a lighting grid designed by Buckminster Fuller and installed for Judy Chicago's 1980 feminist artwork *Dinner Party* that has been there ever since.

The Ellis Antiques Show used to be held in this space. Someone said recently, "When the Ellis moved from the Cyclorama [to The Castle at Park Plaza], all the air got sucked out of it."

Whether that's true, it is clear that Fusco & Four has put much thought into developing this show's image, taking care with every detail. On Thursday's preview night, a benefit for Artists for Humanity, which employs teens to produce and market artwork, there was live jazz, which set the tone, and plenty of good food: passed hors d'oeuvres, roast beef, salmon, and an appropriately colorful fall salad of beets and sweet potatoes, followed by miniature pastries and coffee.

Within the first hour red dots began to appear. Martha Richardson Fine Art of Boston's Newbury Street quickly sold a Charles Herbert Woodbury oil and a charcoal by John Wilson (b. 1922), *Black Boy*. The centerpiece of her booth, *Union Oyster House, Boston*, a 1931 oil on canvas by Robert Strong Woodward (1885-1957), was also attracting serious interest. A scene of street activity outside the restaurant, which has been serving diners since 1826, it sold to one of those interested parties on the following day.

Over the course of the long weekend, most exhibitors made at least one or two large sales, and some of them had multiple successes. David Major of Spanierman Gallery said, "We were lucky enough to sell a lovely little J.H. Twachtman, and we also continued to meet a number of great people. We were very happy with the turnout. The show seems to be growing each year." *Boats at Anchor* by John H. Twachtman (1853-1902), a 7½" x 9 5/8" oil on panel that dated from circa 1900, was priced at \$135,000.

Shelley Brown and Jim Puzinas of Blue Heron Fine Art, Cohasset, Massachusetts, sold a Harrison Bird Brown landscape of Glen Ellis Falls, New Hampshire. They additionally reported "one definite follow-up and one possible follow-up."

Gleason Fine Art, Boothbay Harbor, Maine, sold a painting by Florence White Williams—a Boothbay scene, as it happened — and were waiting to hear whether their deal was solid for a Harry Aiken Vincent. David Hall Fine Art, Dover, Massachusetts, sold a Karl Oberteuffer to the trade. Other sales are noted in the captions.

Not everyone likes Boston's cautious shopping style, it is true. Fifty years ago, Cleveland Amory in *The Proper Bostonians* described the character of the true Bostonian as "a combination of wholesale charity and retail penuriousness." People from everywhere have moved here, mingled, married, but the Yankee way with the nickel and dime still seems to prevail. In Shelley Brown's words, "Boston is a tough crowd, as you know." That may be the reason why other galleries have tried this show and not returned.

Because of the antiques focus of this publication, we did not spend much time with the contemporary art dealers, but Fusco named for us several who'd had successful shows. New York City's Arcadia Fine Art, a first-time exhibitor, was pleased to have sold a \$47,000 painting by Malcolm T. Liepke. The Addison Art Gallery, Orleans, Cape Cod, Massachusetts, whose price point is between \$2000 and \$5000, sold "numbers of things rather than one or two big ones," Fusco said. The Banks Gallery, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, had multiple sales of period and contemporary paintings of New Hampshire's White Mountains and the New England seacoast.

On the night after the preview, there was a party for new collectors, as opposed to young collectors — a calculated, semantic edit that we applaud. Intended to be more casual than the previous evening's soiree, Friday's event was just as much fun and, more important, just as crowded. Three educational programs were scheduled for the neophytes, from 4:30 to 9 p.m. They were fully subscribed, standing room only, prompting Fusco & Four to move to the top of its agenda for next year figuring out how better to accommodate the crush.

Peter Trippi, former director of New York City's Dahesh Museum of Art, who is currently editor of *Fine Art Connoisseur*, was one of the program presenters; his topic was "Collecting 19th-Century Art Today."

"Recognizing that a lot of material has become so expensive you really need the deepest of pockets to compete, I tried to shed some light on areas of quality that might be flying a bit under the radar," Trippi told us later. He focused in particular on European, academic images, he said. "They are well made and, although not at the very peak of fashion, certainly good investments, as well as wonderful to live with. I also looked at drawings from several different periods and touched on photography." The photos he chose were European views. "They are not necessarily by names we would recognize, but their compositions are interesting and full of ethnographic information. Prints are also tremendously good value; there are still some great, buyable ones out there."

On Sunday, the final day of the show, author Simon Houpt spoke and signed copies of his new book *Museum of the Missing: A History of Art Theft*. All 20 copies sold.

Something else that Fusco & Four does right is to keep and hold an influential list of collectors, which includes collectors like Boston's John P. Axelrod, scholars like Harvard's Theodore E. Stebbins Jr., and three emissaries from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, director Malcolm Rogers and curators George Shackelford and Erica Hirshler.

"I think it's important for Boston to be able to support an exhibition like this," said Hirshler. "I think it does all of our institutions in town a lot of good to foster an interest in art and collecting." Comparing a museum visit with a visit to a show, she said, "I think there's so much more of an aura of discovery here, with artists who may or may not be represented in institutional collections. This show has such a wide range, it also gives people the opportunity to happen upon something they might not yet know they're interested in."

Hirshler is herself a collector who has bought items at this show over the years. Asked to describe her collection, she said, "It is very eclectic, including both old and new things, and I buy completely based on a gut emotional reaction."

Vose Contemporary Realism would have pleasantly confounded anyone who aims strictly to choose either traditional or contemporary art. A division of Vose Galleries, Boston, which celebrated its 165th birthday in December 2006, it featured trompe l'oeils by David Brega (b. 1948) that included such images as antique postcards, cartes de visite, 19th-century envelopes, paintings by the Peale family, and the cover of a 1986 issue of *The Magazine Antiques*. Brega's work was selling for \$9500 to \$48,000.

"The gate was definitely strong this year," Carey Vose wrote us in a post-show e-mail, "with many more collectors coming through the booth than last year...We will do the show again next year, possibly expanding our presence."

"For me it's always a good sign when someone says they leave, 'I'm back next year, and I want the same booth,'" Fusco said. "Or, in the case of a couple of them, 'I'm back next year, and I'm going to need more room.' And we did get a lot of that, more this year than ever."

The word international in the show's name refers to the art, not the dealers, and this year 38 exhibitors were from the United States, while only two were foreign, those exceptions being Gladwell & Company of London and Peter Buckland Gallery of St. John, New Brunswick, Canada. Recently, Fusco said, he has received inquiries from galleries in Mexico, Venezuela, France, and Germany, and owners of galleries in the United Kingdom and Sweden made visits to the show. As the only show of its kind in New England enters its second decade, it may well be going global.

For more information, contact Fusco & Four at (617) 363- 0405; Web site (www.FineArtBoston.com).