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May 22nd, 2012

20th- and 21st-Century Art and Design in Boston

by Jeanne Schinto

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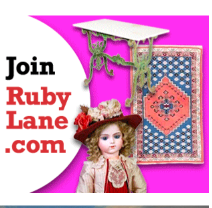
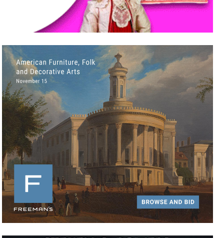
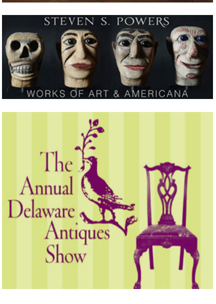


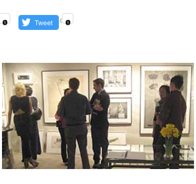




Boston, Massachusetts

by Jeanne Schinto

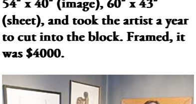
The fifth annual AD 20/21 gala preview, held March 15 at the Cyclorama in Boston's South End as a benefit for Boston Architectural College (BAC), was a rollicking one, so filled with merrymakers that some aisles were nearly impassable at the party's height. We had parked in the underground lot and were getting our first look at dealers' booths when we heard that 50 cars were waiting to be parked by the valets, and police were intervening as a result.



The booth of Center Street Studio, Milton Village, Massachusetts, on gala night. *Nine Black Poppies* by Richard Ryan (b. 1950) is partially seen at right, blocked by the couple standing near the daffodils on the table. A woodcut printed on natural Kozo paper, it measures 54" x 40" (image), 60" x 43" (sheet), and took the artist a year to cut into the block. Framed, it was $4000.

That's how you spell success for a show opener in a congested neighborhood like this one.

Dealers reported that booth traffic over the weekend (the show ran through Sunday, March 18) was steady. One said he saw "more young people and children than I have seen at a show in many years."



From right, Center Street Studio's James Stroud; Martha Richardson; and artist John Wilson and his wife, Julie. Photo by Robert Four of Fusco & Four/Ventures.

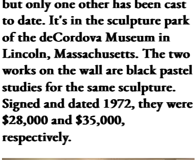
The good gate was partly because of the usual ambitious publicity efforts of Tony Fusco and Robert Four of Fusco & Four/Ventures, LLC. It was also partly happenstance. The promoters moved the show to mid-March from April to avoid the spring-like weather that in past years they felt may have held their attendance numbers down.

It wasn't intentional, then, that the show fell on Saint Patrick's Day weekend. Nonetheless, many people who were out and about because of this important Boston holiday visited the venue, and at least one publication listed the show as among things to do to celebrate it.

Offered by Boston's Martha Richardson at $125,000, this is John Wilson's maquette for his Eternal Presence, a larger-than-life (7' tall) bronze of an African-American boy's head that was installed on the lawn of Boston's National Center of Afro-American Artists in 1987. Signed and dated 1985, the 40" x 30" x 37" bronze is numbered 2/10, but only one other has been cast to date. It's in the sculpture park of the deCordova Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts. The two works on the wall are black pastel studies for the same sculpture. Signed and dated 1972, they were $28,000 and $35,000, respectively.

Ironically, spring-like weather jumped ahead along with the show, but it didn't seem to matter. On the contrary, the nicest day, Sunday, was the show's busiest, said Fusco. "We were busy literally from the time we opened the doors until ten minutes after we closed when we were having to tell people it was time to leave."

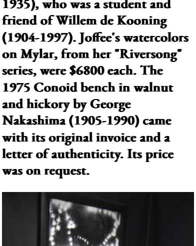
The Cyclorama's glorious circular space accommodates 35 or so AD 20/21 dealers who exhibit contemporary and 20th-century furniture, decorative arts, and fine arts. Added to that group for the fourth year in a row were about ten dealers of fine prints who comprise the Boston Print Fair. It's a logical and easy melding of the enterprises. Lithography, photography, and other mechanically reproduced works of art go perfectly with the Modernist and post-Modernist sensibilities and styles that the AD 20/21 dealers' wares represent.



Davenport & Shapiro featured the work of Harriette Joffee (b. 1935), who was a student and friend of Willem de Kooning (1904-1997). Joffee's watercolors on Mylar, from her "Riversong" series, were $6800 each. The 1975 Conoid bench in walnut and hickory by George Nakashima (1905-1990) came with its original invoice and a letter of authenticity. Its price was on request.

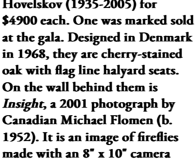
True, there has been dealer turnover each year, but it's to be expected of what is still a fledgling show, especially one that debuted in awful economic times. That said, there are several steadfast anchor stores, so to speak, and plenty of dealers to take the place of those who don't return, willing to try their luck, Irish or otherwise, in Boston.

One of the show's veterans is Boston's Martha Richardson, who made a bold statement by devoting her entire booth to works by locally born African-American painter, printmaker, and sculptor John Wilson, whom she now represents in New England. It amounted to a mini-retrospective, featuring a full range of the artist's oils, drawings, lithographs, and sculpture.



Boston's Machine Age offered two Harp chairs by Jorgen Hovelskov (1935-2005) for $4900 each. One was marked sold at the gala. Designed in Denmark in 1968, they are cherry-stained oak with flag line halyard seats. On the wall behind them is *Insight*, a 2001 photograph by Canadian Michael Flomen (b. 1952). It is an image of fireflies made with an 8" x 10" camera and a large-format gelatin silver-toned printing process. Number two in an edition of four, it was priced at $12,000.

The 90-year-old Wilson, who taught at Boston University for decades, has created a number of large-scale public artworks with powerful political messages. One of the maquettes—an African-American boy's head—was for sale at the show. Titled Eternal Presence, the full-size (7' tall) one was commissioned by Boston's National Center of Afro-American Artists. Many other Wilson works address the social and political strife caused by racial and class divisions. One of his best-known prints, *Native Son*, depicts Bigger Thomas, the tragic figure at the center of Richard Wright's 1940 novel.



Garvey Rita Art & Antiques offered a mix of folk art, Modernist art, and furniture from various periods. On the side wall, *Purple and Green*, a 1992 pastel on paper by Wolf Kahn (b. 1927), was marked $35,000. Below it was a 19th-century Chinese altar table in black lacquer, tagged $900. On the back wall, *Three Heads Frontal*, a 21" x 30" stone lithograph from a 1963 edition of 38 by Lester Johnson (1919-2010), was $2400. The 1930's "Men in Road" sign in cast iron and painted tin was offered at $375. For the same price one could have the 20th-century painted-tin and wood railroad sign, 13" x 24", or the 20th-century painted-wood dart board, 28" x 18". The Biedermeier lacquer side chair was one of a pair priced at $1600. The 19th-century painted and gilded wood New England shutter/screen, 28" x 42", was $5000. One of our favorite pieces at the show (not shown) was Garvey Rita's turn-of-the-19th-/20th-century New York state railroad ticket booth screen in brass, which had been turned into a wall hanging. Made to fit a 53" x 21" ticket-booth window, it featured a tight, geometric pattern that uncannily suggested an Islamic design. Marked just $375, it sold at the gala.

Asked why she decided to have the one-person show at AD 20/21, Richardson, who has been a fan of Wilson and quietly handling his work for 15 years, said, "I thought it was a fantastic way to introduce or reintroduce John's work to a different audience in Boston. That's because I think the people who come through the AD 20/21 show are often very different from those I already know from the gallery and the ones I have met from the Boston International Fine Art Show"—i.e., BIFAS, held in this same space every November and, like this show, promoted by Fusco & Four.

"So it seemed like perfect timing-the perfect storm-and the response was tremendous," Richardson continued. "I have already sold a few things, and absolutely people are calling and wanting to come in. It's exactly what happened after BIFAS in the fall. I sold four or five things within two weeks after that show. With John's work, they want to come in and see the other work before they decide. I'm thrilled with the response."

After he received his lifetime achievement award, Vicente Wolf browsed in the booths of the Boston Print Fair.

Childs Gallery, Boston, which, like Richardson, has done this show every year since the start, devoted its booth to Expressionism by Karl Zerbe (1903-1972), Ture Bengtz (1907-1973), Anne Lyman Powers (b. 1922), and Giovanni DeCunto (b. 1949). The large, wildly colorful canvases of living artist DeCunto, who applies his paint not by using a brush but rather by squeezing it directly from the tubes onto canvas in expressive gestures, were arresting. Fusco & Four put one of them—the artist's 53" x 83" *Cherubs*—at the show's entryway, making it the one work that everybody coming to the show saw first.

Palette Contemporary Art & Craft, Albuquerque, New Mexico, brought an array of mid-20th-century clocks and radios, including a 1956 Crosley clock/radio with leatherite-covered cabinet, restored, $300; a 1969 Panasonic AM-FM table radio with a hinged door that conceals its chrome control panel, $325; a 1950's Kundo wood and brass battery-operated clock, $500; and a 1953 RCA tube radio with cloth-grilled wood case and lighted dial, $525.

Those who haven't kept up with Childs Gallery's evolution in recent years were surprised by its choice of Expressionism; others weren't. Previously best known for such specialties as 19th-century marine paintings, American marine Impressionism, and old master prints, Childs has integrated many more recent and contemporary works into its inventory. Its 2012 Painting Annual begins with 19th-century landscapes by Thomas Hewes Hinckley (1813-1896) and Paul Weber (1823-1916) and concludes with 20th-century figural bronzes by Donald De Lue (1897-1988), Richmond Barthé (1901-1989), and Dudley Vaill Talcott (1899-1986).

Said Richard L. Baiano, who with Stephanie V. Bond owns Childs, "Even [gallery founder] Charlie Childs in his time often showcased the work of artists who were contemporary. Given the way that Giovanni [DeCunto] is tied to our traditions here at the gallery, and in particular with what we're doing with Boston Expressionism now, [the focus chosen for the show] didn't seem like a stretch for me. I take very seriously the stewardship and reputation of the gallery, and I feel it's always important to keep one foot rooted in the past and one foot stepping forward. That's what I've been trying to do since Stephanie and I took over almost four years ago."

He went on to say that "because we have the gallery on Newbury Street, and because we cover a lot of ground in being a generalist gallery, we thought we would use the opportunity in AD 20/21 to appeal to a demographic that might not necessarily be aware that we have this kind of material." He and Bond also wanted to show "the arc" that extends from the postwar period of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where Zerbe and Bengtz taught and where Powers studied, through to the present day.

"DeCunto, while he isn't a Boston Expressionist himself, comes from that influence, in that [leading Boston Expressionist and Zerbe student] David Aronson was his teacher."

Interestingly, Aronson, DeCunto, and John Wilson are all connected. In 1955 Aronson was invited by Boston University to direct its emerging visual arts program, which has now become the College of Fine Arts. In 1964 he was the one who hired Wilson to teach at BU. That's how Wilson came to teach drawing to DeCunto, a promising BU student of the 1980's.

We last wrote about antique silver dealer Robert Lloyd of New York City when he showed at the Ellis Boston Antiques Show in October 2011, yet another Fusco & Four production. As a first-time exhibitor at AD 20/21, he brought some excellent silver pieces, but what we found much more newsworthy was the rest: something new for him-20th-century furniture and decorative arts.

One wall of his booth was taken up by a four-part painting of an open, lipsticked mouth by U.K. artist Tom Hallifax (b. 1965), known for his blowups of faces, hands, and objects. A pair of carved chairs was from the West Indies, where mahogany was the coin of the 18th-century realm, but these were 20th-century products, made of the wood that's considered to be the densest and heaviest wood in the world, lignum vitae.

Lloyd also brought a pair of circa 1970 cone-shaped glass-shard lamps, described as "possibly Italian," and, just to mix it up even further, a pair of 14th-century Asian lion dogs (komainu), carved of Japanese cypress. Obviously, they were way earlier than the stated focus of the show, but if they elicited disapproving murmurs from anyone, we would have murmured right back, since they went so well with everything else in the booth.

Another 2011 Ellis Boston Antiques Show exhibitor, Richard A. La Vigné of New York City's Knollwood Antiques, had a double booth larger than the one he had in the fall, but this time he filled it with 20th-century items. The eclectic mix of American, Continental, and Asian pieces was dominated by two mammoth 1970's wall panels of smoked Lucite embedded with rotating colored plastic balls. Below the panels was a 1910 J.M. Young settle in quartered oak in the Mission style of the Arts and Crafts period. On a 1970's coffee table in front of the settle, he displayed tribal Hmong silver necklaces as sculpture.

Reportedly Knollwood did "crazy well," in the words of one of his fellow dealers. "I heard that they practically sold out their booth and had to go bring in more stuff." Fusco confirmed: "Richard came to me on Friday and said he had a problem. He told me, 'If I deliver everything I've already sold, I'm not going to have anything in my booth.'" In fact, La Vigné did bring in fresh material for the remainder of the weekend, Fusco said.

La Vigné, for his part, wrote only this in an e-mail: "It was a terrific show. We met our financial goal and have several pieces on reserve, pending decorator—and/or architect—involvement. Met two professional designers who wish to move forward on projects that include our firm...." The designers may or may not have visited the show as a result of a private event, arranged by Fusco & Four, in which 55 members of the design trade, along with many of their clients, were invited on Friday at noon to enjoy a buffet lunch on the premises and a sneak preview of the show before it opened to the public at 1 p.m.

Another New York City-based dealer, Hal Katzen, was satisfied with his sales. Among major ones were *Kym*, a 2011 work on paper by Alex Katz (b. 1927), and *Nude in the Woods*, a 1980 woodcut by Roy Lichtenstein (1923-1997). Katzen said he also sold some Sol LeWitt (1928-2007) works to "a wonderful young collector."

The collector was a new client for Katzen. In fact, in each instance he made sales to people he had never met before. We suggested to him that the oft-repeated idea that Bostonians have to see a dealer three times before they buy is unfair. He laughed. "They sometimes had to come back three times to look at it over the weekend, but that's fine." Speaking more generally, he continued, "One of the great things about graphic work is that, while they've gotten more expensive, they still, comparatively speaking, present an opportunity. A Lichtenstein painting is multimillion dollars, so buying the woodcut is a way to get a work by a great master for a relatively modest price."

Every year at this show someone in the design field is awarded the AD 20/21 Lifetime Achievement Award. This year, Vicente Wolf, a designer known for his use of white, was presented the award on the evening of the gala by BAC president Theodore S. "Ted" Landsmark. The next day, Wolf gave a talk to a sold-out crowd (the price was show admission), which included the 55 designers and their clients who attended the buffet lunch. He then generously gave the talk again to those who had been closed out of the first one. The subject was the infusion of global design and style into his work, which is also the subject of his latest book, *Crossing Boundaries: A Global Vision of Design* (2006).

Other special events through the weekend—a panel discussion, a slide lecture, and informal dealer chats—drew crowds of people to the venue. One dealer chat, given by master printmaker James Stroud of Center Street Studio, Milton Village, Massachusetts, attracted 50 people, all crammed into his double booth, according to a head count by a member of Stroud's staff.

Stroud has been making the contemporary prints of John Wilson since 2000, so that was yet another connection to the distinguished nonagenarian. As part of his exhibit, Stroud had a slide show illustrating the development of Wilson's iconic Martin Luther King etching. "John is working on a self-portrait etching right now," said Stroud. "Having that historical context [in Martha Richardson's booth] was a great counterpoint."

Some of Stroud's other contemporary artists include Laurel Sparks (b. 1972), Rachel Perry Welty (b. 1962), Bill Thompson (b. 1957), Jeff Perrott (b. 1966), Cary Moyer (b. 1960), and Richard Ryan (b. 1950). He said that Ryan's large woodcuts—e.g., *Nine Black Poppies*—were "the big hit." In general, he said, "This year's show was, typically, very good. I had one exceptionally good show here two years ago, but they've all been profitable for me."

Fusco and Four make a major effort to involve public institutions in the show. Their curators are heavily represented in the honorary committee, and many attend the gala and revisit dealers over the weekend. We witnessed a curator from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston making serious inquiries in the booth of BG Galleries, Hingham, Massachusetts. We also heard from Howard Shapiro of Davenport & Shapiro, East Hampton, New York, that, besides selling a number of significant pieces of art pottery and a painting by Swiss Cubist Gustave Buchet (1888-1963), he was asked to provide follow-up information on items to representatives of the MFA and the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University.

Shapiro was anticipating further discussions with clients on a Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975) drawing and an Albert Wein (1915-1991) sculpture. In addition, a George Nakashima Conoid bench attracted "some serious reverse inquiry" that may result in his purchase of a Nakashima dining room table and 12 chairs. "It was a solid show for us—a really busy show," he said.

For more information, contact Fusco & Four/Ventures at (617) 363-0405 or visit the Web site (www.AD2021.com).

Knollwood's circa 1910 J.M. Young settle was $3650. Above it, the 1970's two-sided decorative panels were $8500 for the pair. The 1970's coffee table, built with a solid wood frame overlaid in fine linen, then lacquered, was offered at $5500. The 1980's chairs with heavy wood frames and diagonal fluting were $6850 for both.

BG Galleries, Hingham, Massachusetts, asked $2600 for the pair of circa 1956 klismos chairs designed by Kenneth Froy for Maison Art. The legs are stained mahogany. The 1940's Kittinger Mandarin Greek Key chest, refinished in white lacquer, was tagged $5900.

The vanity and matching chest of drawers against the wall were designed in 1964 by Gio Ponti for the Hotel Parco dei Principi in Rome. They were offered by BG Galleries for $26,500 and $18,000, respectively. The seat in front of the vanity is one of a pair of Italian stools; the price for both was $4200. On left, one of a pair of 1966 Tecno Tub chairs by Eugenio Gerli; the two were $3400.

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