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VALEDICTORIOUS PRESENT

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AUG 5, 2015

# The Seattle Art Fair Was So Successful, the City Literally Applauded

Who knew Paul Allen cared this much about art? He has emerged as Seattle art's mega-patron

by Jen Graves



**Paul Allen, inspired by his experiences over the years at the Venice Biennale, decided out of the blue to found Seattle Art Fair, from scratch.** SOFIE LEE

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hen the clock struck 6 p.m. on Sunday night and the loudspeaker announced, "Seattle

W Art Fair is now closed," the few hundred stragglers still standing inside CenturyLink Field Event Center clapped and cheered. They were exhausted, relieved, exhilarated, and already nostalgic. The fair was a long flight that landed, safely, at last.

"Who!" called Greg Kucera, the elder statesman of Seattle gallerists, surrounded by sculptures and paintings as far as the eye could see. He was also standing at the culmination of three decades of showing and selling art in Seattle. "It's been years since I heard applause at the end of an art fair." And that was in Chicago or LA, he couldn't remember which, not Seattle. "The city came out."

Seattle Art Fair will be back next year—same basic time, same place. But what is its long-term future? Its historic significance?

"This is the mark of a city growing up," said the widely loved Seattle artist Jeffrey Mitchell, taking one last look at the fair and the increasingly shiny neighborhood of the Seahawks and the Sounders on Sunday night. It's a comment that gets made about Seattle every few years. "For better and for worse," he continued. "Art can be *commerce*," he finished, struggling to articulate a complicated and delicate proposition about cities and economics and aesthetics, and concluding that maybe people will actually want to buy art in underdog Seattle.

Seattle has had art fairs before, but not like this. This one was charmed. You could feel it the minute you walked into CenturyLink Field Event Center. The ceiling was so high, it formed a whole vast night sky above the warren of bright booths with their white walls. Aisles between the rows of booths were as wide as boulevards; you weren't just looking, you were strolling, gliding across the smooth concrete floors.

A tree-lined cafe designed by Olson Kundig stretched from indoors to outdoors, bringing inside the sparkling August sun and the screaming fighter jets of Seafair. Thanks to Seafair, sailors and marines roamed the streets and the fair. After hours, soccer fans wailed in love and disappointment at their beloved Sounders in the stadium.

Seattle's notoriously terrific restaurants were full of people, and the fair's various VIP parties buzzed at the junction of New York glamour and West Coast chill. At some points, Seattle felt like an entirely new place, where artists in every medium and living from Phnom Penh to Seattle, Tokyo, Almaty, Los Angeles, Oakland, Beijing, and Brisbane found admirers young and old, transgender and cis, the whole scene

serenaded by the mixed-race, mixed-genre band the Flavr Blue as the voice of Hollis Wong-Wear floated above a sunset party high in a new "vertical neighborhood" downtown tower on Saturday night.

If it felt like a renaissance, it did mark the arrival of a Medici. Some of the wealthiest men in the world live in Seattle, but art and culture here have suffered for resources for years, failing to build collector and donor bases, or major events that reliably attract outsiders to the artists of the region. But now, while Bill Gates focuses on global health and education with the Gates Foundation and Jeff Bezos works toward global business domination with Amazon, Microsoft cofounder and Seahawks owner Paul Allen is emerging as the patron of art in Seattle.

Allen, inspired by his experiences over the years at Venice Biennale, decided out of the blue to found Seattle Art Fair, from scratch. He hosted it at his stadium and he attended on opening night, not just making remarks but making purchases.

Allen and his company, Vulcan, have been quiet blue-chip collectors for a long time, and of course Allen founded for his collection of music and sci-fi paraphernalia the Experience Music Project with its Frank Gehry–designed building at Seattle Center, so he has been visible as a cultural force in various ways.

But in the last two or three years, he's increased his profile tremendously, commissioning publicly accessible outdoor sculptures by regional and international artists for his properties in South Lake Union, launching this international art fair—which drew more than 60 galleries, with 20 from New York (including heavy hitters), 13 from Seattle, and others from California, Portland, Tokyo, Seoul, and Hong Kong—as well as, just last week, announcing a new contemporary arts center that will be free and open to the public at his Allen Institute for Brain Science, coming in December.

On opening night, in addition to whatever more secretive and more expensive purchases Allen made, he selected paintings by young local artists showing at Woodside/Braseth Gallery. Two were bland, pretty scenes of an untroubled planet, but the third is from a body of work about leafy subdivisions encroaching on wild places like Issaquah, by Nathan DiPietro, whose dystopian landscapes are striking for being so realistic. Allen, in other words, is an uneven collector. It's still a big deal to be noticed by him.



**Paul Allen showed up and unexpectedly bought work by young local painters, including this piece by Nathan DiPietro, whose dystopian landscapes are striking for being so realistic.**

COURTESY OF WOODSIDE/BRASETH GALLERY / PHOTO BY RICHARD NICOL

"I'm trying not to let it affect me," DiPietro said. The painting is a portrait from memory of a 1920 shipwreck memorial on the Washington Coast. "I think the big thing I got out of going to the art fair was that I'm not intimidated by any of this work. Is this what New York and the international art scene is bringing to the table? I can work with that. I'm just making art."

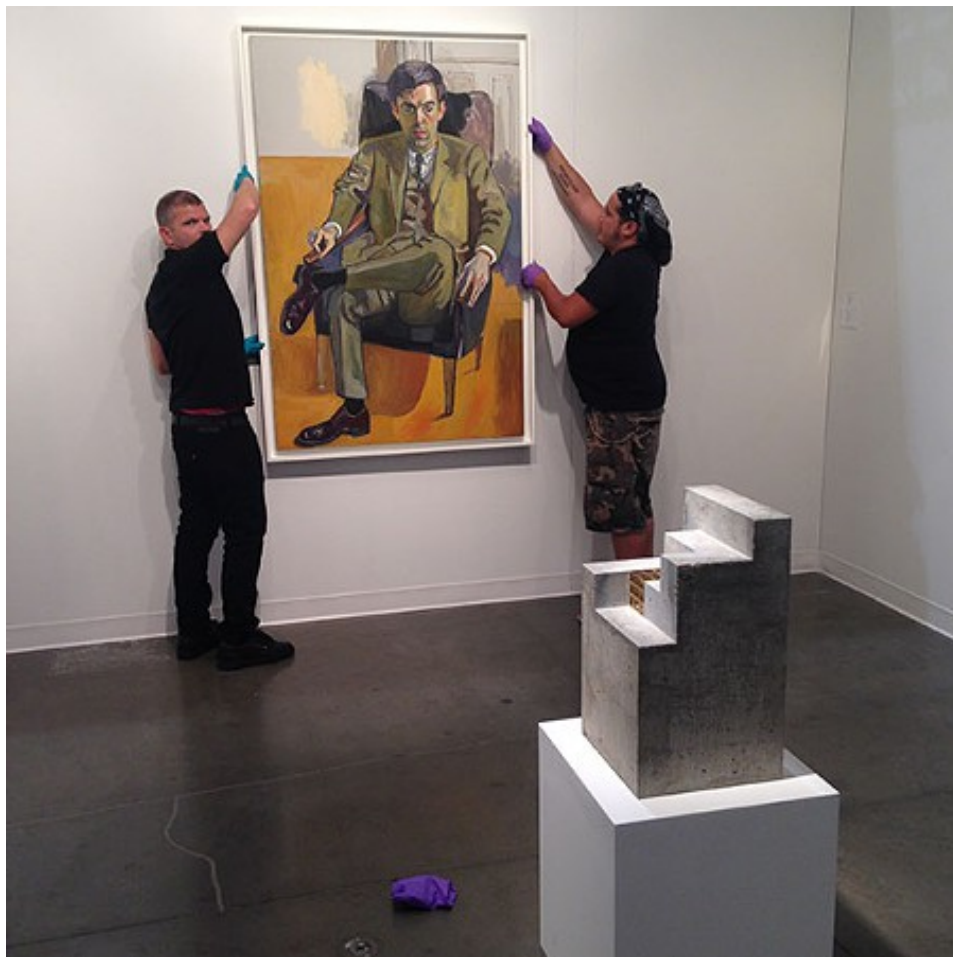
The gallerist John Braseth was thrilled that Allen didn't just go for the old Northwest modernists he had on hand. "They didn't buy any of the classics, which I love," he said. Braseth bought the biggest booth (rates were \$26 per square foot, which is low compared to other high-profile art fairs, so dealers are warily waiting to hear about rates for next year) and served complimentary champagne, wine, and Fran's chocolates all weekend. He sold at least one classic to a buyer whose name he wouldn't disclose, though he said the work "will probably end up at Seattle Art Museum." It's a small stacked-oval *Obos* sculpture by noted abstract modernist George Tsutakawa, who Braseth said made the piece out of teak wood from a boat that sank in Lake Union. The artist got the wood by swimming down to the bottom of the lake himself, Braseth said.

The fair felt alive all weekend, sometimes crowded but mostly just pleasingly populated. Total attendance was more than 15,000, said Max Fishko and Jeffrey Wainhouse, the organizers, who own Brooklyn-based fair company Art Market, which also presents fairs in Miami and other places. Ticket sales from the first two hours of

the fair brought in \$85,000 for Artist Trust, the local artist funding nonprofit, more than double the promised donation of \$30,000. Seattle Art Fair "met or exceeded" all Art Market's expectations, Wainhouse said, "and hey, we read in the *New York Times* that Pace"—a big-name New York gallery, one of this year's anchors—"will be back."

The *New York Times* and *Artforum* magazine sent writers and photographers, making this the most media-saturated of "any art event in Seattle history," said Kucera, who added, "Did you hear White Cube and Marian Goodman Gallery are talking about coming next year?" Those are two great galleries out of New York and London.

The great galleries this year didn't leave the great work at home. David Zwirner of New York, which had the best display of all, brought and sold pieces by Carol Bove (a brass and concrete sculpture, listed at \$150,000), Oscar Murillo (a large painting collage, listed at \$250,000), and Christopher Williams (the last photograph of his lovingly repaired car, listed at \$65,000). Also in the booth, there was a light piece by Dan Flavin, an orange box by Donald Judd, and a Luc Tuymans painting that made a local art-history student cry tears of appreciation.



**New York Gallery David Zwirner had the best display of all, including this stunning 1969 portrait by Alice Neel. The painting was first hung in a closet where you had to request to see it, but the closet door was broken, so people kept getting locked in with this intense, glowering**

**presence.**

In what became a saga, Zwirner also brought a stunning 1969 portrait by Alice Neel, of her son Richard, who was 30 years old in the painting and a very serious-looking fellow. Zwirner first hung the painting in the booth's closet, where you had to request to see it. But the closet door was broken, so people kept getting locked in with this intense, glowering presence. Then, when the gallery shelved the painting for a day, visitors driven by word of mouth were disappointed, and gallery reps felt terrible. On the fair's last day, the portrait finally made it out where crowds gathered and where it stole the show from the big, shiny \$1.2 million pumpkin sculpture by Yayoi Kusama, a Japanese artist few visitors probably knew had her earliest exhibitions in Seattle.

**W**hat really mattered was when glitz, heart, and brains joined forces.

Ramiro Gomez is a young LA artist with Charlie James Gallery who made a huge impression. Seattle Art Museum director Kimerly Rorschach bought one of his pieces for her personal collection, and so did big-time LA/NY collector Beth Rudin DeWoody. Gomez paints laborers—usually brown-skinned, faceless men and women—back onto photos and ads from magazines for products and lifestyles where the labor has been hidden from view (like high-design houses whose maids don't appear in *Architectural Digest*, or hot new restaurants where the trash-takers and dishwashers aren't part of the glossy profiles).



**L.A. artist Ramiro Gomez paints laborers—usually faceless, brown-skinned men and women—back onto ads from magazines for products where the labor has been hidden from view.**

COURTESY OF CHARLIE JAMES GALLERY / PHOTO BY MICHAEL UNDERWOOD

James, the LA dealer, said, "No doubt, I will come back." The gallery was selling work by Gomez, Jennifer Dalton, Daniela Comani, and Guy Richards Smit—and James was satisfied that "the collector class came out, even if I don't know if the iceberg of upper-middle-class techies can be melted." His assistant, an artist named Sarah Weber, said visitors and buyers here "have more of an emotional connection with the work... It's less of an investment vibe. It can get really frustrating when it's like, 'Oh, I just want one, I don't care what it is, because this artist is hot right now.'"

Dealers were surprised at an outpouring of gratitude from Seattle visitors.

"Seven different people thanked us for coming," said Koki Ishibashi, of Tokyo's Koki Arts.

"We don't usually get thanked for going to an art fair," the attendant at Zwirner said, describing the warmth of the atmosphere, the good feeling, with a little bewilderment, as several dealers did.

That said, dealers across the board tired of answering the clueless question "So, did you make the art?" In the war of snobs versus rubes, one corner of the fair contained a gem. An unmarked plywood box the size of a small room with a door in it and a guard outside it stood mysteriously apart. It turned out the guard had a list, and if your name was not on it—and your name was not—then you were not allowed inside the box and through to the private, black-curtained viewing room of Gagosian Gallery, where exclusive works would be set on an easel or plinth for your personal delectation. The guard confirmed this while unfolding The List, on which I could make out only a first name, "Candy," before he folded and repocketed it.



**If your name was on the list, you were allowed through the Gagosian Gallery's plywood box to a private, black-curtained viewing room where exclusive works would be set out for your personal delectation. This guard is miming for the camera: "not you!"**

"I sometimes tell people it's a weeping room for artists who feel unappreciated," he joked.

But all questions of commerce and elitism could be escaped by entering a huge, dark chamber of cinema called *Thinking Currents*.



*Thinking Currents* was a free, curated exhibition of 30 works of video and sound art by artists from across the Pacific Rim. This was not a name-dropping show, it was a show of works by artists spelunking in the human-made haunting storage tunnels soon to be forever filled with oil in Singapore, or bathing a dead sperm whale beached off the American coast with a handheld yellow sponge, or filming crowds of young people satirizing enforced enthusiasm in Beijing, or paying tribute to a family history of having been relocated along with 50,000 others from Korea into Kazakhstan by Stalin.

*Thinking Currents* was the most artistically significant thing that happened at Seattle Art Fair, and it was crowded all weekend. "I am so touched by the response," said Leeza Ahmady, the *Thinking Currents* curator, whose work is a culmination of her own life experiences as a woman born in Afghanistan, immigrating to the United States, and looking across distances and histories. She hopes to return next year. I hope *Thinking Currents* is the opening show at Paul Allen's new arts center, or presented at Seattle Asian Art Museum, or frankly finds extended life in Seattle anywhere. Fleeting greatness is for look-at-me billionaires and Vegas. Recycling, extending, making things last—sustainability—is how to matter.

Panels, discussions, performances, and side exhibitions focusing on postcolonialism and technology were more mixed. Bitforms, a gallery from New York, brought artist Addie Wagenknecht to perform, and she strapped on a gas mask and went to mesmerizing work creating abstract paintings using powder pigment and a remote-controlled drone. To view an Oculus Rift piece by Micah Ganske, you had to wait in a long line; in a fair with so much going on, I never had time. A small, nice surprise was a satellite exhibition of tech-related work at Allen's Living Computer Museum, reachable by free shuttle. In a lengthy talk, leading New York artist Natalie Jeremijenko peddled her parade of distressingly cute neoliberal Band-Aids for environmental emergencies.

The other off-site sanctioned events featured Seattle artists and locales in supporting roles. On the beach at Myrtle Edwards Park, just north of the Olympic Sculpture Park, local artist Jenny Heishman displayed, on a huge stand of bleachers, the hand-painted backdrops used for high-school dances by local professional photo studio Yuen Lui. Yuen Lui does this digitally now—they use green screens—which is how Heishman came into possession of the backdrops. For decades, kids posed in front of the

awkwardly hand-painted Seattle skyline, or a tropical beach, or a pastel romantic-vined trellis—just the way they were now standing in front of an awkwardly hand-painted Seattle skyline in front of the actual Seattle skyline.

**H**ow were sales? No overall sales figures have been released. Most dealers said they'd want to return. "But in the art world, everything is anecdotal," Charlie James reminded. Dealers do not have to pay a portion of their proceeds to Seattle Art Fair, but they do have to pay to ship the artworks, to install and deinstall them, to staff the booths for the entire weekend, and to rent the booth spaces from the fair company, Art Market. So each gallery is going to have to make its own calculation about whether to come back. Platform and SEASON, two local galleries, sold only a few works but were happy with the exposure.

"I'm out of red dots!" whispered Jane Beebe of PDX Contemporary Art from Portland, holding open a white envelope in which there was, actually, one red dot left, to be used to mark a work of art as sold. Beebe sold works by Jeffrey Mitchell "like crazy," as well as pieces by Northwest artists including Joe Rudko, Marie Watt, Kristen Miller, and James Lavadour, in prices ranging from \$80,000 down to a couple thousand. She had first-time Seattle collectors ask her, "How do we do it?" but she also sold to seasoned collectors and big corporations.

Gana Art, the sole gallery from Seoul, admitted it probably hadn't made enough in sales to justify returning. Others were doing the math. Kucera, of Seattle, sold a satisfying number of works from his gallery, pieces by Sherry Markovitz, Victoria Haven, Mark Calderon, SuttonBeresCuller, and Margie Livingston.

But Kucera was agitated at regional collectors who he said came through and waxed about how beautiful and terrific the fair was but hadn't bought anything.

"This isn't book club," Kucera snapped. "If that's the way it is, then these things don't continue."

When local artists heard Seattle Art Fair was coming, many knew they wouldn't be included. Rather than indulging sour grapes, local impresario Greg Lundgren assembled a force of curators and artists to present a local satellite show, *Out of Sight*.

*Out of Sight* became the second-best thing about the fair, and crowds streamed the short walkable distance across the parking lot from CenturyLink to see the paintings, sculptures, videos, drawings, and performances of 100 local artists.

*Out of Sight* was in a dreamy place: a raw upper floor of King Street Station, above the palatial lobby of Seattle's Grand Central (King Street was designed by the same men as Grand Central, a few years prior).

By next year's fair, the ongoing gentrification of Pioneer Square will almost certainly mean that King Street's open spaces will be rented to commercial tenants and closed to the public. What will happen then? Artists are already planning.

Over the course of this first fair, an estimated 5,400 people attended *Out of Sight*. Several of the works sold, including a large graphite drawing bearing a list of vices by Amanda Manitch and droll photographs of abstract triangles set in idyllic landscapes by Jennifer Zwick. Artists MKNZ and **Mary Ann Peters** (a Stranger Genius Award nominee this year) made an installation in one corner of *Out of Sight* that resembled a stretch of patterned tin ceiling on the floor—but it was made entirely in flour.

Those were some of the highlights, but the truth was that *Out of Sight* was wildly uneven, in both quality and style. It had four curators and would have benefited from being divided into four shows, each with a statement of conviction.

Nearby, *FEAT 2015*, another small independent exhibition in another inspired location—a historic Pioneer Square underground—featured ashy, ornate funerary urns in ceramic by George Rodriguez and bloody sculptures and drawings of death and children by Humaira Abid.

All manner of local artists visited the fair, from the just-starting-out to senior royalty like the painters Elizabeth Sandvig and Michael Spafford, who noted wryly, "We have outlived our audience," and "There's no Chihuly."

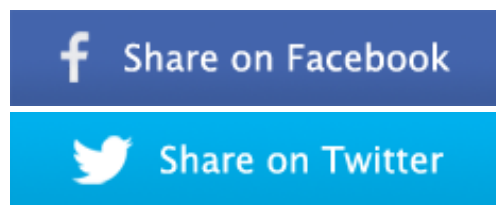
Dale Chihuly, the glass king, was part of the local network that supported the fair behind the scenes, but his work was nowhere to be seen at the fair itself. Traver Gallery, which represents him, invited him, but he declined, said Bill Traver, adding, "We're not, and never have been, just a glass gallery." Plenty of people still gawked at the colored glass in Traver's booth: fractured domes by John Kiley, some of which sold. Non-glass sculptures by Jamie Walker also sold at Traver. Walker is head of the School of Art at the University of Washington. On opening night, Walker sauntered casually in with the VIPs, wearing jeans and sandals. "What?" he said. "I always wear jeans."

"I think they have no idea how much we want them to succeed," artist Ben Beres told me, referring to the fair. Beres was high after meeting 72-year-old sculptor Al Farrow and nerding out with him about casting. Farrow's work was featured at Forum Gallery

in a mini-show, and a larger exhibition of Farrow's works was picked up by Bellevue Arts Museum for a future date. Farrow told Beres he's finally getting recognition, and to hang in there. "That's like 40 years from now for me!" Beres said, laughing. He was giving a tour of the fair to musician John Roderick, current candidate for Seattle City Council. The mayor had attended opening night and lavished praise.

"Nothing can be like the first year again," said Justen Waterhouse, a local art student who worked all weekend as a fair art guide and trash collector, one in an army of temporary workers responsible for the rise and dismantling of an entire universe in miniature. ★

*See more photos from the fair **on Instagram @thejengraves!***



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## RECOMMENDED EVENTS

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Wed Aug 5 at 5 pm.

**Drunk the DJ** at Revolver Bar

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Wed Aug 5, 6–9 pm.

**NARN Letter Writing Party** at Wayward Vegan Cafe

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Wed Aug 5 at 7 pm.

**High On Fire, Pallbearer, Lucifer, and Venomous Maximus** at Neumos

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Wed Aug 5 at 7:30 pm.

**The Funky Meters** at Jazz Alley

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Wed Aug 5 at 8 pm.

**Red Bull Sound Selects Presents: Porter Ray** at Barboza

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# the Stranger

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