

**Art Platform
PULSE and Fountain**

Los Angeles: Art Fair Destination

By Jennie E. Park

"LA is having a very special moment right now," gushed Adam Gross, Executive Director of *Art Platform*, a new contemporary and modern art fair launched in Los Angeles last fall by trade show behemoth *MMPI*. *MMPI* entered the rarified world of international art fairs several years ago with its acquisition of New York's prestigious contemporary art fair, *The Armory Show*. A month before *Art Platform* opened on September 30, 2011, Gross offered a guided tour of two floors of *L.A. Mart* — a merchandise mart managed by *MMPI* in downtown Los Angeles — that had been hollowed out in preparation for the fair's booths, exhibitions, and lounges. During this tour, Gross expressed, at length and in depth, his excitement about the LA art world. "Like Paris in the teens and twenties, and New York in the thirties and forties, you have this remarkable concentration of energy and activity, of ideas."

On the show's inaugural opening night, the energy was indeed electric, and self-conscious, as though people were excited about being collectively excited in the same place and time. The vernissage, which served as an unusual benefit for not one, but three, local art museums — *MOCA*, *LACMA*, and *Hammer* — drew a buzzing coterie of art world VIPs to rival the giddy glitz of any of the city's vaunted film premieres. While Gross noted that most of the artists featured by exhibitors on both floors "are doing something that's very LA-centric," a clear aim of the fair was to draw international attention. Upon exiting the elevators on the show's main floor, visitors were flanked on one side by fifty-five feet of backpacks stitched together into an Ai Weiwei installation, and on the other by nine rows of nearly eighty international exhibitors. Among the local galleries present were veterans *ACE*, *Richard Telles Fine Art*, and *Michael Kohn*, as well as newer enterprises such as *Marine Contemporary*.

Populated exclusively by LA-based alternative or nonprofit art spaces and art publications, the concourse level of the fair was a conduit to the upper floors; in this LA-dominated ecosystem, concourse-level artists were expected to eventually percolate up to the second floor. The concourse level's lay-

out, resembling a meandering stream, starkly contrasted that of the main floor—"less grid and booth," Gross explained, "and a little bit more like the Independent in New York." An eclectic video lounge on the concourse level was hosted by *Artillery Magazine*, an alternative publication dubbed "LA-centric" by its publisher, Paige Wery. The morning after the show's opening, Wery remarked, "This is a very special weekend — we've never had this big of an art fair out here. I was talking to the gallery owners [here]—everybody goes to New York and Miami to buy stuff; well, they actually flew out here this time to buy. And everybody's talking about it — that's a really big deal for us."

Indeed, the consensus among exhibitors was that Southern California — with its renowned and ample arts graduate programs, relatively low rents, and great weather — is indisputably a world-class art production hub, but its collector base has yet to rival that of other great art capitals. "I'm hesitant to call LA an art capital completely," Gross commented, "because, while it has amazing collectors, it doesn't have as many as it should. There's a reason why New York takes its position as an avant-garde center in the thirties and forties and is able to parlay that into becoming a great art center for decades. Part of it is geographic, but the other part is that the city supported its artists. Andy Warhol could make a living as an artist there, and get to the point where he became Andy Warhol." Larger LA-based galleries travel extensively for international fairs, Gross noted, because the majority of their clients are outside LA.

Tulsa Kinney, *Artillery Magazine's* editor, concurred. "Collecting in LA has always been a problem," she lamented; "that's why LA is kind of held back or not taken as seriously as New York or London. And I don't know why that is—sometimes I think LA has a low self-esteem problem." She surmised that LA collectors may not trust their judgment and may rely on other cities' paradigms to guide

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Alec Soth, *Untitled (md10002-689-1)*, 2010. Archival pigment print, 32 x 40 inches. Courtesy: Art Platform, Los Angeles

their tastes. According to Gross, expansion of the collector base in LA is a major ambition of *Art Platform*. "I'd like to see LA galleries feel like this is a city worth investing in," he said. "Look at *Blum and Poe* and their amazing 22,000-square-foot space. They didn't open a gallery in New York, or Tokyo, or London—they didn't just double down, they tripled down on what they had invested in Los Angeles, they believed in it. Look at Shaun Regen and the expansion of her galleries in Culver City—at L & M, Harry Rubenstein, and the other galleries that are investing in LA and see it as a place worthy of investment." Gross's interest in cultivating LA as an all-around art capital comes as no surprise; he was born and raised in LA, completed his MFA in contemporary art history as well as his undergraduate work at UCLA, and worked in development at MOCA.

A free shuttle bus — a rare convenience for Angelenos who would otherwise need to drive and pay (again) to park — escorted visitors between *Art Platform* and *PULSE Contemporary Art Fair*, one of the satellite fairs that typically operate near major art fairs, such as *The Armory Show* (New York) or *Art Basel Miami Beach*. *PULSE* was housed in what appeared to be a billowing white cocoon on the Event Deck (rooftop) of L.A. LIVE. Cornell DeWitt, the fair's director, echoed Gross' and Kinney's sentiments: "There's an incredible art community in LA, but you can ask any gallery in LA, and they'll tell you that you can't support a gallery in LA on just the LA market." Describing why *PULSE* nonetheless came to LA, he explained that *MMPI* had been in conversation with Helen Allen—the founding director of *PULSE*, who launched the fair in New York several years ago—about someday doing a fair in LA. When it came time for DeWitt to decide where *PULSE* should

travel to next, he went with LA. "What appealed to me in particular was the idea of formulating the *PULSE* brand as a brand of U.S. fairs—that if we were going to do LA, we're not going to do Hong Kong, or London," he explained.

At around the same time DeWitt picked up his predecessor's conversations with *MMPI*, the Getty started promoting *Pacific Standard Time (PST)*, an ambitious series of exhibitions to take place throughout the greater Los Angeles area, highlighting the region's art from 1945 to 1980. DeWitt explained that *PST* "had been on a back burner for ten years; it's just been in the last year that they started putting all of the logistics together." He felt that *PST* would attract enough international visitors to LA to warrant producing the fair in the city. "We have an international mailing list of 23,000 people, 8,000 on our VIP list; *MMPI* has probably twice [those numbers]. And so, we thought, this was an opportunity where we can really focus the attention of the whole world on LA. *PST* was really the deciding factor."

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Jennie Park interviews John Leo, the co-founding Director (with David Kesting) of *Fountain Art Fair* in Los Angeles. Photo: Adrian Belic, 2011.



Jennifer Steinkamp, *Madame Curie*, 2011. Computer animated projection. Courtesy: ACME, Los Angeles.

The weekend of concurrent openings of *Art Platform*, the Getty's *PST* exhibition, *PULSE Art Fair*, and *Fountain*, a New York-based alternative art fair making its debut in LA, corralled an exceptional concentration of visual art events in LA. "We've sold out most of the hotels downtown, and managed to make a centralized art happening in downtown LA this weekend," DeWitt observed. He noted that the city's sprawl "has definitely been a hindrance in terms of LA promoting itself to the outside world. You get your typical art collector from New York or Europe and they think, 'OK, I'm going to LA for a 4-day weekend.' And they start looking at maps, they hear stories about the traffic and neighborhoods and they're like, 'I could spend the weekend there, and see four galleries.' It's absolutely daunting. That's why, more so than any other art community out there, LA needs a good caliber fair that can bring together galleries from all over the world, who talk to their VIPs, clients,

collectors, and artists, and say, 'Everybody, we're going to LA.'"

While *Art Platform* was clearly the main attraction, hosting the largest group of exhibitors supported by a generously funded program, *PULSE* had a simple, accessible appeal that featured younger galleries, both remote and local, such as *Dean Project*, *Kavachnina Contemporary*, and *LeBasse Projects*, while *Fountain* pushed its brand of grass roots art in its trademark raw curatorial approach. DeWitt deferred to art historians to comment on *PULSE*'s intersection with the LA art scene. "We're facilitators. We're not defining art history. People are talking about how having big important art fairs coming to LA means that LA is now an important scene. I don't see it as that. That is like putting the cart before the horse a little bit. We're just facilitators in terms of connecting the local art community to the rest of the world and vice versa."

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Jennie Park interviews Cornell DeWitt, the new Director of *PULSE Contemporary Art Fair* in Los Angeles.
Photo: Adrian Belic, 2011

Participating from New York’s Lower East Side galleries, Bart Keijzers Koning, a partner in *LMAKprojects*, commented on his gallery’s decision to test the waters in LA by showing at *PULSE*: “We were very curious as to what’s going on in LA, and working with *PULSE* is always a good deal, so we decided to check it out. LA visitors have been very grateful; they appreciate that we’ve come all the way out here to interact with them on their turf.”

On his measure of *PULSE*’s prospects in LA, DeWitt estimated that the fair in New York and Miami has typically attracted 10,000 to 15,000 visitors, so he anticipated a similar turnout for LA. “But,” DeWitt added, “at the end of the day, if six people show up and buy something from every gallery in the fair, then I’ll be reasonably happy. Overall, it’s always going to be the quality of the people, not the quantity.”

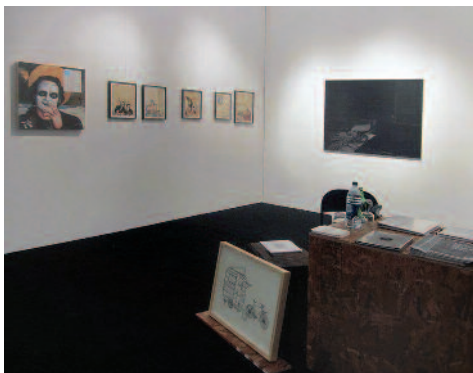
While concurrent art fairs are typically cast as competitors, DeWitt noted that both he and Gross realized that cooperation among all fairs—in their production and promotion where possible—would be integral to their success during their inaugural weekend in LA. “There are certain aspects where we are competitors at the end of the day, but at the start of the day, we both want this whole thing to be successful.”

Fountain Art Fair, which originated in New York, and, according to co-director, John Leo, has always germinated around a major commercial fair, was housed in what appeared to be an abandoned warehouse in the downtown arts district. Leo explained, “I came to LA in May [2011] and saw seven venues, and I walked into this place and was like, ‘This has *Fountain* written all over it.’ Its two 4000-square-foot warehouses and 1,000-square-foot courtyard made me feel like it’s the right



Tony Tasset *Mood Sculpture*, 2011. Fiberglass and paint, 90 x 18 inches.
Courtesy: Kavi Gupta Gallery, Chicago and Berlin.

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Installation view of work by Russell Nachman, Kevin Cyr and Jowan van Barneveld, at PULSE LA 2011. Courtesy: LMAKprojects, New York.

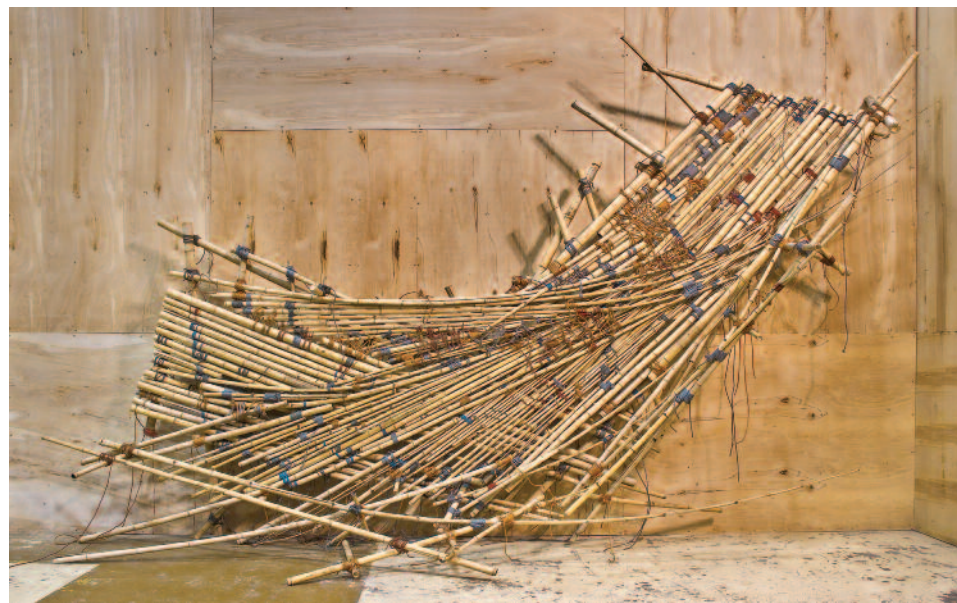
kind of venue.” In a layout resonating with that of *Art Platform’s* concourse level, *Fountain’s* exhibitors were assigned wall space without booths, enabling visitors to flow through the open space without impediment from one exhibitor to the next, and view all of the artwork as a collective in dialogue. An airy central stairway led up to a platform where an artist was quietly lying on his side and painting against a wall, pleasantly responsive to any questions a visitor had about his work. “We wanted to keep the big open feel of the venue, and keep it accessible for everyone,” Leo said.

On its low-key Friday night opening, *Fountain* could have been missed by passersby who weren’t expressly looking for it. As we observed mostly teenagers and twenty-somethings milling around in groups of twos and threes, he continued, “The fair is for everybody. We’ve got work here for fifty dollars, and pieces that peak out at about \$12,000. We’ve had people come in who are in their early teens, to into their sixties, and sold quite a bit of work. I just acquired a couple pieces here myself. I believe in supporting these guys and letting them grow the right way. A lot of them are independents, so I try to help push them to the right audience.”

Like DeWitt, Leo, a New York City denizen, did not seem particularly versed in the Los Angeles art landscape or invested in cultivating it; but he did see the iconic West Coast city as a fresh and relevant participant in conversation with the art world

in New York. “A lot of the work coming out of Los Angeles has a lot of street edge to it, and because a lot of the work we work with has the same vibe, we wanted to bring our artists here. It was a no-brainer for us. All I know is that it’s this city that I’ve always targeted, and I’ve always been told this is the place to come to, so I thought, ‘Let’s take a chance, let’s go for it.’ I’ve been pleased with how it’s gone so far.” Leo also noted that he is eager to showcase LA artists in future editions of *Fountain* in New York or Miami. “We actually have a couple [LA] galleries [showing] here — *Chalk* in Venice Beach, *Blythe Projects* in Culver City.” He added, “I want the West Coast, East Coast”—and here he clasped his hands and smiled—“unified.”

On how *Fountain* cooperated with the much larger commercial fairs, Leo noted, “Adam Gross and Cornell have been really, really welcoming, and they helped us promote and everything. It’s not like anything I’ve experienced in the past, where you’re in direct competition with so many fairs. Take Miami, for example, where you’ve got eighteen exhibitions going on at once; everyone’s vying for the exact same audience. But here, there are only three going on, and it’s the inaugural show for all of them, so everybody wants to work and play really well together. I don’t think it could’ve gone off any better than it has. I’ve left passes for them at the door, and they’ve left passes for me at the door. I’m going to get to view everything else that’s going on.



Doug and Mike Starn *Met, Venice #1*, 2010-11. Bamboo and nylon rock climber’s cord, 10 x 14 feet. Courtesy: Art Platform, Los Angeles

Synchronizing visual art events in time and space into one metaphorical shot, commanding a concentrated gaze, rather than one diffused across time and the sprawling topography of Los Angeles, could be key to developing sustained interest in collecting in a city accustomed to screen-gazing. *Art Platform’s* chosen visual identity, Catherine Opie’s *Freeway* series photograph of the underside of crisscrossed freeways, is iconic to any Angeleno who equates survival in the city with navigating its traffic. Yet the photograph also underscores LA’s status, on par with that of New York, as a nexus for commerce and travel; and, as a nexus, a natural focal point. Ichiro Irie, owner and director of *J AUS*, an artist-run space among the collectives exhibiting on *Art Platform’s* concourse level, noted that Hollywood and the art world are kindred in that both rely on commanding an audience’s gaze. “On one level, it’s all theatre. There’s a kind of theatricality to how you want to install the show, how you want people to experience the work, and how

you think you want people to experience the evening in terms of having an opening.”

Steve Turner of *Steve Turner Contemporary*, an LA-based *Art Platform* exhibitor showing on the main floor, opined, “I think the thing that’s changed [in the LA art world] is the excitement level — there’s more attention being paid to the city.” Turner created a map of Los Angeles artist studios that were also open for visits during the weekend of the fairs, adding to the temporal concentration of art events. (The maps parallel Hollywood star maps indicating where movie stars live.) Turner noted that, despite the disparateness of artist enclaves observable on his map, artists tend to see each other often at weekly gallery openings, and are accustomed to driving across town to do so. In his mind, artist communities have always been vibrant and cohesive in LA, but the global art community’s focus on LA has sharpened. “I don’t know how much has changed in reality, but perception has definitely changed.” **M**