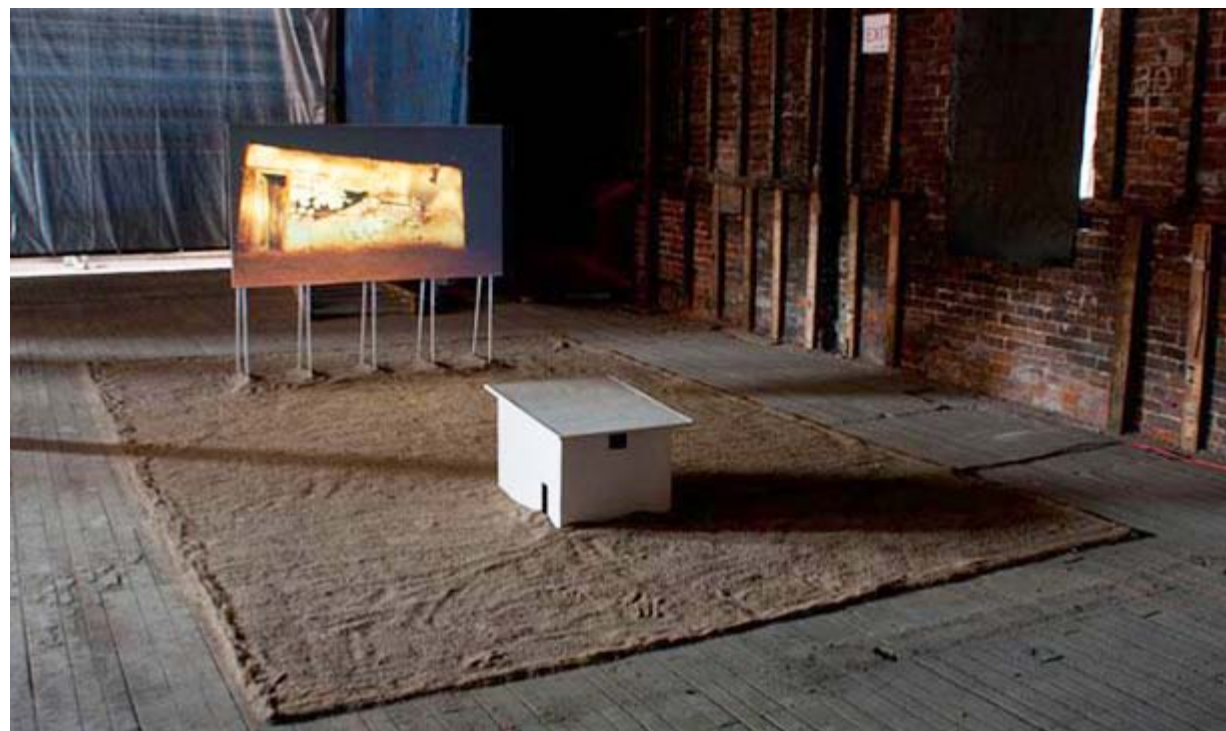


BLOUIN ARTINFO



Can a New Art Fair and a Cadre of Wealthy Boosters Transform Buffalo Into a Cultural Destination?



Courtesy Echo Art Fair

An installation by Michael Bosworth, at Swan Lounge

by Julia Halperin, ARTINFO Canada

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Hotel Lafayette / Courtesy M.V. Jantzen via Flickr

“Do you know who built that building?”

I was asked this question no fewer than five times during my visit to Buffalo last weekend, every time we drove by a red brick structure in the heart of downtown known as the **Hotel Lafayette**. It wasn't long before I was dutifully replying, “The first female member of the American Institute of Architects: **Louise Blanchard Bethune.**”

The neoclassical hotel in question — one that would look not out of place on a Haussmanian boulevard in Paris — was recently reopened to the public after a massive renovation project. (For years, it was abandoned;

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as my hosts put it, it was “not *exactly* a flophouse.”)

Welcome to Buffalo, New York, where people know their architectural history like Manhattanites know their bus schedules. As many who live there will tell you, Buffalo was the richest town in the United States 100 years ago, before its fortunes sank when shipping vessels were rerouted on the St. Lawrence Seaway. Today, Buffalo finds itself in the middle of yet another transition.

Armed with the esteemed arts and culture public relations firm **Resnicow Schroeder & Associates** — which is better known for representing august art institutions like the **Dallas Art Museum** and the **Israel Museum** — the city’s tourist agency is hoping to transform its reputation from a Rust Belt industrial town into a vibrant cultural destination.

“I think the region’s identity is becoming more tied to visual arts,” **Colin Dabkowski**, an arts writer at the Buffalo News, told **ARTINFO**. “Five years ago, I would have said that’s not really true. But I think they’ve made a lot of progress in starting to bring down the barriers between the public at large who attends Bills games and institutions like the **Albright-Knox**.”

One harbinger of this shift is the **echo Art Fair**, which debuted its second edition in the city’s Larkinville district on July 7 and 8. The event is the brainchild of **E. Frits Abell**, managing director of tech advisory firm **Northside Investors** and an art collector himself, who years ago started a network for professionals born and bred in Buffalo called the “Buffalo Expat Network.” Abell, who spends most of the year in New York City, decided to return to his hometown to launch the fair in an effort to provide the city’s art community with more exposure.

“Buffalo has a limited number of galleries for the amount of art that’s present,” Abell told ARTINFO. But while the gallery business in Buffalo remains modest — the fair hosted only 15 booths for galleries, four of which were local, while the remaining 28 booths were given to individual artists — the city has a large artist population. (That part isn’t surprising: Rent is cheap and local institutions like the **Burchfield Penny Art Center** and **Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center** frequently acquire or display work by living Buffalo artists.) To Abell, a fair seemed like a logical way to promote the work of individual artists who may not have the opportunity to show regularly elsewhere.

But a successful fair needs collectors, a critical mass Buffalo appears to lack. By Saturday afternoon, this reporter spotted a lone red dot in the fair’s halls, and no galleries we spoke with reported sales. (Abell maintains more works were sold on the fair’s second day.) “One of the challenges in Buffalo is expanding the collector base,” said **Elisabeth Samuels**, owner of Buffalo gallery **Indigo Art**. “We need people to understand collecting art is not just for an elite group.” In other words, Buffalo wants to create collectors, not simply lure them.

To that end, echo worked to cultivate an approachable vibe. Staffers in bright orange t-shirts cheerfully handing visitors a map at the entrance seemed more reminiscent of camp counselors than security guards. “There is absolutely money to collect here,” said Abell. “It’s an untapped community of people who need a little bit more educating.” Prices at the fair, often posted gamely on wall labels, ranged from an affordable \$175 (for a small work

on paper featuring oil blots by local artist **Jody Hanson**) to \$22,000 (for a wall piece made out of a stitched comforter by Vancouver-based artist **Liz Magor**).

But echo — as well as the art community in Buffalo as a whole — seems to be at a crossroads, torn between identifying as a venue for local artists or a more discerning venue to display art from around the world. While local artists' booths did contain some strong work — intricate abstract patterned pen drawings by artist **Katie Sehr** were a standout — the most memorable booths were largely those of Canadian galleries. Oil paintings of jagged lines that looked like thread from afar by **Sasha Pierce** (\$6,000) from Toronto's **Jessica Bradley Art + Projects** were a knockout, as was a haunting self-portrait photocollage by **Suzy Lake** from the late 1970s at the booth of Ontario's **Georgia Scherman Projects**.

The decision to invite galleries from outside Buffalo to participate in the fair drew ire from Buffalonians who were denied admission. Some were unhappy that the fair was seeking to, as former participant **Bruce Adams** told the **Buffalo News**, “[bring] galleries in from other areas to attempt to reach our market, which is pretty slim.”

Similar complaints surrounded the most recent edition of **Beyond/In**, a biannual, multi-venue art exhibition that originally displayed the work of Western New York artists, but expanded last year to include international names as familiar as **Andy Goldsworthy**, **Do Ho Suh**, and **Kai Althoff**. (In both cases, the soon-to-depart Albright-Knox director **Louis Grachos** was said to play an important role, personally recruiting galleries from Canada to participate in echo and pushing for a more cosmopolitan biennial.)

It is apparent, even after a short visit, that Buffalo loves its own artists and loves its own history. (It's where **Robert Longo** and **Cindy Sherman** developed their styles as students at **Buffalo State**, after all.) But as local artist Hanson told ARTINFO, in order to share that legacy with the world, Buffalo may have to open itself up a bit. “You have to make it attractive, or no one will come,” she said simply. “They will come to see Andy Goldsworthy.”

To see a slide show of select artworks at echo Art Fair, [click here](#) or on the slide show button above.

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