

Treasure hunters seek to be satiated at art smorgasbord

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Gallerist Yves Trépanier with Evan Penny sculpture Michael (Variation #2).

Photo: Justin McManus

American art historian Robert Storr has likened art fairs to "treasure hunts" - the kind of treasure hunt where "unless you have money you don't get to take the treasure home".

But don't let that dissuade you. At the Melbourne Art Fair, you can find treasures for, ah, \$2500 or less - such as striking geometric tapestries created by Australian Tapestry Workshop weavers based on designs by artist Peter Atkins - or as much as \$250,000 for a hyper-real sculpture by South-African born Canadian artist Evan Penny, whose work could be mistaken for that of Australian-born Ron Mueck, with whom he has a friendly rivalry.

Penny, 57, has been working as long as Mueck, he just isn't as well known, but the art fair is about to change that. The Canadian TrépanierBaer gallery is showing at the art fair

for the first time and Penny is one of four artists being exhibited.

"That's what art fairs are about, you want to present the best work that you have in your gallery at the time," dealer Yves Trepanier said yesterday, as he set up for tonight's launch.

The five-day art smogasbord, which opens tonight with a chi-chi cocktail party for the art world's A-listers, has more than 3000 treasures to choose from over two floors at the Royal Exhibition Building.

With 80 Australian and international galleries exhibiting, the fair can be an overwhelming experience - for the audience and the artists.

Dealers pay up to \$30,000 for the privilege of exhibiting, but they don't always make money in the first instance.

Prominent Melbourne dealer Dianne Tanzer exhibited at the art fair for 12 years before selling a thing.

"People just ignore you for the first couple of years because they don't know who you are," Tanzer said.

The exposure eventually pays off. "It's the biggest event on my calendar. Going overseas is prohibitive to us, we are not a gallery that can afford to go to the Basel art fair," said Tanzer, who this year is showing a cool, dystopian installation featuring the photo-realist paintings of Juan Ford and haunting sculptures by Charles Robb and Natalie Ryan.

In 2008, more than \$12 million worth of art was sold at the fair and the next five days will be a litmus test of the market. In these fiscally tight times, painting (as opposed to installations and video works) have made a comeback - from the delicate oil paintings of young Emily Ferretti to the recognisable abstracts of established artists such as John Olsen.

"Painting is almost like a salve," said Brisbane dealer Edwina Corlette, who opened her gallery two years ago and is exhibiting at the Melbourne Art Fair for the first time.

"I don't think people want to be too challenged right now. We are in the middle of an election campaign, there is the global financial crisis, there is a lot challenging us right now ... and there is something soothing about painting."