



Toronto-based artist Evan Penny's sculptures are on exhibit this weekend at Art Toronto (a.k.a. the Toronto International Art Fair). KEVIN VAN PAASSEN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

ART

Made in Canada. Showing in Toronto

For the crowds gathering this weekend at the Metro Convention Centre, the appeal of Art Toronto is the range of Canadian work

JAMES ADAMS

There are many ways to encounter art, but since the turn of the century, one that's gained steadily in importance is the art fair. Often knocked as temporary luxury malls for the rich, hit-and-run superstores for art consultants and decorators, the triumph of commerce over connoisseurship, it's this very "efficiency" that accounts for their appeal, according to Toronto photography dealer Stephen Bulger.

Art Toronto (a.k.a. the Toronto International Art Fair), at the Metro Convention Centre this weekend, has embodied this trend to a T. Now in its 12th year, it ranks as one of the major events on the fall Canadian cultural calendar.

In 2000, its inaugural year, Art Toronto drew about 80 exhibitors, 75 per cent of them from Canada. This year, 109 galleries are flogging their wares – a good 65 per cent of them Canadian but now buttressed by a highly visible contingent of exhibitors from art-world hot spots such as New York,

London and Berlin. By fair's end Monday afternoon, paid attendance is expected to have surpassed last year's 18,000, with art sales totalling more than \$20-million.

"A lot of people find galleries intimidating and an art fair isn't that intimidating; it looks like a trade show," says Mr. Bulger. Fancy a giant black-and-white photographic tapestry of Brad Pitt's mug by legendary New York artist Chuck Close? It's here for the taking – provided you have \$132,500 for the giving.

Still, as these things go, Art Toronto is pretty decorous. Not-for-profits seem to like it: Thursday, for the fifth time in the fair's history, the Art Gallery of Ontario announced its purchase of several works from dealers at the fair, including two drawings by Margaret Priest, two photographs (one by Scott McFarland, the other a triptych by Chris Curreri) and *The Bride*, a video by Nick and Sheila Pye.

Steven Levy happily characterizes Art Toronto as "a very strong regional Canadian fair with inter-

national ambitions." He's senior vice-president and general manager of MMPI Canada, a company that produces and manages conferences, which took over the fair in 2008 from its founder, Vancouver's Linel Rebenchuk, but has kept the highly regarded Mr. Rebenchuk on as the fair's vice-president.

"Canada traditionally has not been perceived as one of the major art markets," Mr. Levy noted. "But I think Linel has been gradually building the event so that currently it's the largest of its kind where you can see so many good Canadian galleries in one place."

This Canadian-ness used to worry Nicholas Metivier, who's been a fair staple since opening his eponymous Toronto gallery in 2004. As a result, he supported efforts several years ago to lure New York galleries to Toronto by "giving them special prices on booths. Well, it didn't work. But what has worked – which I was afraid would kill it or at least not move it forward – is that it's become a very strong national fair." There's

now a significant group of Quebec dealers – close to 25 this year – "that weren't there a few years ago, while the international exhibitors, especially from Europe, have grown in a natural way."

"We never wanted the show to be too big," Mr. Rebenchuk concurred. "We just go with trying to balance the market with the show, to make it steady, organic."

Returning to Art Toronto for the second time is Manhattan's Lyons Wier Gallery, sparked, in part, by the strong sales enjoyed last year by featured artist Greg Haberny. In considering participation in fairs outside the U.S., co-owner Michael Lyons says he's partial to "events that really draw a national audience ... What's nice about Art Toronto is that anyone who's interested in contemporary art in Canada comes to that fair whereas when we do a fair in, like, Miami, we get a lot of New Yorkers, people we typically meet on a day-to-day basis. With Toronto, we get a whole brand-new audience."

Yves Trépanier of Calgary's Trépanier Baer Gallery has attended

every Art Toronto save one (2009, "because of the economy"). "We generally sell a fair bit of work every year, certainly enough to cover our costs," he said. "But a fair is not just the event; it's the people you meet – everybody's here – and I can honestly say in the years we've been coming, we always sell work after the fair as a result of being here."

Mr. Metivier, in the meantime, thinks things are unfolding quite nicely, thank you very much.

"We just did a show in Los Angeles [Pulse L.A., Sept. 30 to Oct. 3] which was not good. I was saying to my staff there, 'The gala at Art Toronto blows this out of the water – the quality of collectors, the intensity of the crowd.' As Canadians we still suffer from the glass-being-half-empty syndrome somewhat. But it's not so half-empty any more; Art Toronto is evidence of that."

Art Toronto continues at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre through Monday, closing at 6 p.m. ET. General admission: \$18 (\$16 online); students and seniors: \$14.