

first fruits

With competition reaching a frenzy at art fairs, collectors are wielding press passes and even donning overalls—anything to get in early and secure a deal **By Carol Kino**

WHEN THE ARMORY SHOW FIRST OPENED in 1999, collectors who attended art fairs usually tried to make it to the benefit preview. Today, as fairs have become a crucial part of the market landscape, the game has changed. New works are increasingly likely to debut at fairs rather than in gallery shows, and primary-market dealers are behaving like secondary-market specialists, squirreling away treasures for opening night. If you want to nab choice works, many collectors say, it's not enough to come to the first half-hour of the vernissage. You might need to get inside before the doors open.

There are numerous stories of collectors getting into fairs early, often recounted with a mixture of incredulity and amusement. A dealer at Art Basel a year or two back recalls having spotted New Jersey management consultant David Teiger strolling among the booths before the show opened, carrying a yardstick and a level. At last year's Armory Show, a surprising number of collectors managed to get into the press preview. And at Art Basel Miami Beach this past December, observers were buzzing about the financiers Henry Kravis and Donald Marron, who had reportedly received private tours the day before the vernissage.

Whitney Museum of American Art trustee Beth Rudin DeWoody, dubbed "the ultimate fair-sneaker" by one dealer who declines to be named, compares the experience to attending a tag sale or a flea market. "They say 9 o'clock, but there's a line at 7 o'clock while they're setting up because everyone wants to be first." For DeWoody, early entry is simply practical. "There are so many people when the doors open initially. You keep running into people you know—it slows you down. It's so much nicer to go in when it's quiet and no one else is there, so you can really see the work."

The rush actually starts weeks in advance, says New York dealer Brent Sikkema, as collectors try to figure out who's bringing what. "People know that over the telephone they're not getting the whole story," he says. "Smarter collectors find out when you're going to be doing your shipment and start sniffing around the gallery, so they can see what's being wrapped up for the truck."

Marc Glimcher of PaceWildenstein compares the frenzy to "the ritual of the auction." These days, 25 percent of the work at fairs may be "extraordinary material," as he puts it, while the rest is pretty much what can be seen at the gallery any day of the week. "As the work is being packed up for the fair, at some point it makes the transformation from the profane to the sacred—the object of everyone's desire." According to Glimcher, a collector's surefire route to early access is to join the fair committee or become a sponsor. "The classic way to sneak in now is to be an underwriter. They all come in whenever they feel like it, because they paid for it. It's just a matter of money."

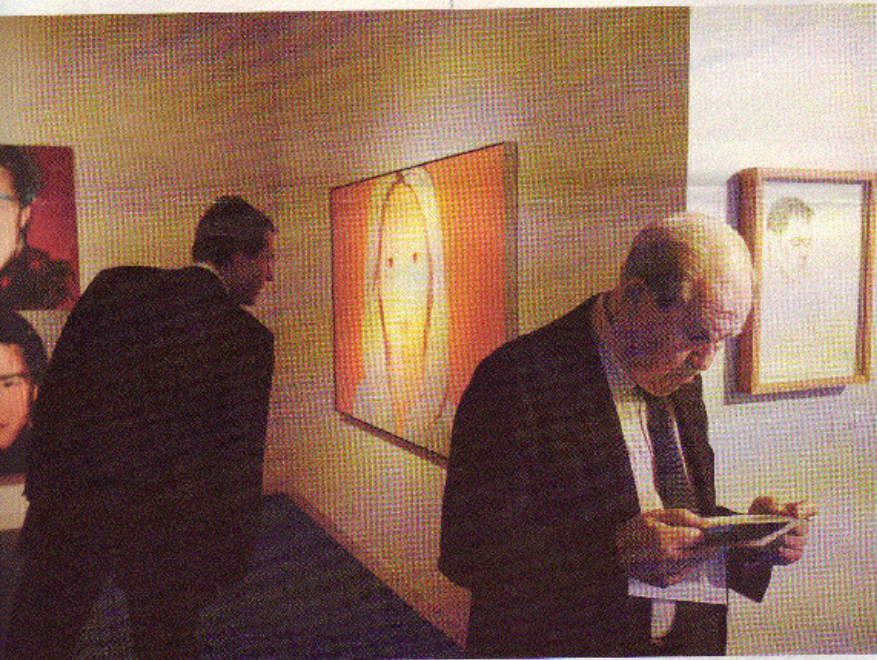
Others prefer the gambit of Washington, D.C., lobbyist Tony Podesta. "The best thing of all is to get installer's credentials. Instead of just wearing black, it's very important to bring a pair of overalls and a hammer," the collector says. Before one fair, he and his wife vacationed in Europe with an eye to finding

out what top dealers were bringing. "One of the pieces was installed before the fair opened," Podesta says. "I went in with my overalls. I wanted to see it before I finally decided."

Just how does a collector go about getting staff credentials? The time-honored route is to persuade a gallery to hand over a setup pass or an exhibitor's badge—something that probably isn't hard to do if you happen to be a major client. That's precisely why the Armory Show instituted photo IDs last year, says fair director Katerijne de Backer. But even afterward, she notes, she received several dubious photo submissions. "I had to call dealers and say, 'The lady in that picture who you said was an art handler doesn't really look like an art handler. She's wearing gold earrings!'"

Some collectors prefer to make purchases from a dealer's fair offerings while avoiding the event entirely. Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art trustee Dean Valentine says dressing up as an installer "must be some weird, sexually kinky thing. I can't imagine any sane person going through that to get a piece of art." He would rather canvass dealers in advance to find out what they're bringing. Occasionally, if an artist really interests him and he has a longstanding relationship with the gallery, he'll buy work made especially for the fair based on digital images. "Many times, the gallerist shows it anyway and marks it as sold," he says.

If you can't get in early, don't despair, advises New York art consultant Thea Westreich. Being first is "much more a social phenomenon than it is a buying phenomenon. It's about cachet and prestige," she says. "If you really want to get the job done, staying later is often better than coming earlier. That's how you get a leg up on artists who'll be on everyone's hot list next year."



Collectors browse at Art Basel Miami Beach during regular business hours, above. But savvy insiders are finding ingenious ways to beat the crowds at art fairs