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Laura Washington: Expo Chicago comes but once a year. A call to art lovers to make the pilgrimage.



Expo Chicago kicks off this week, and this arts lover is feeling the love. The annual extravaganza runs Thursday to Sunday, showing contemporary and modern art from galleries around the world. Headquartered at Navy Pier's Festival Hall, Expo Chicago convenes and inspires public programs, installations, and public art presentations.

The 2024 show promises collections from 170 galleries, 75 cities and 29 countries. Expo has all the ingredients a special event can bring together deliciously. It's an international event spiked with Midwestern flair — approachable and real. Visitors drink in paintings, sculpture, installations, and design, from local talents to creators from all points of the globe.

The fair's outlook is highly cosmopolitan, and yes, it can be a tad snobby. That's the art world. The event showcases many pieces few can afford, but many can appreciate. Expo is a chance to check out the latest artistic and cultural trends yet avoids the stuffiness of museums. It's a time to stroll for art.

Not to mention the not-to-be-missed people watching. The attending crowds are steeped in the be-seen scene. The fashion and costumes range from over-the-top "me-obsessed" to subtle sophisticates who prefer black, even though black has been the color of choice for eons. Black has become déclassé, but they could care less.

The event is awash with friends I see once a year. In those fleeting encounters we admire a painting together and make dinner and drink plans that will go unfulfilled. But I will see them next year. I wander up and down the aisles of the sprawling show, on the lookout for local celebrities that I know, yet don't know.

Expo lures out-of-towners, whose fat wallets and sharp eyes crave the unconventional. It is singular exposure for local galleries and their artists. Artists who are enterprising and lucky can hook up with avid collectors from parts faraway.

Gallerists plan for this week all year, hoping to rake in the biggest sales of the year. Their artists aim for their breakout moment.

Expo Chicago brings together the city's art world, all at the same time and place. It also spawns artistic journeys that radiate out from Navy Pier and into the city. One ambitious effort this year is *New Monuments I Chicago*, presented by the Black Cube Nomadic Art Museum and artist Brendan Fernandes.

During Expo, Fernandes will mount a "public intervention," a sculptural installation in collaboration with AIM Architecture that will surround the General John Alexander Logan Monument in Grant Park.

It addresses the dated, and at times inaccurate, tributes to historical figures and reimagines them in more inclusive and diverse ways.

The scaffold-like structure will revisit "the complex history of its likeness, Gen. Logan — a 19th-century figure who initially worked to prohibit Black people from settling in Illinois, but who later advocated for the abolishment of slavery and supported African American rights," according to its sponsors.

The installation will be accompanied by a dance performance choreographed by the artist, with dancers from Chicago's BIPOC and queer communities.

"The Chicago Monuments Project has been cataloging monuments on public land, bringing awareness to monuments that need to be reframed," said Cortney Lane Stell, Black Cube's executive director and chief curator.

"Fernandes is based in Chicago and rooted in various communities within the city. Community engagement is a large component of this work to reimagine monuments as a space to gather and reflect the diversity of those who live within Chicago."

More, please.

Expo Chicago is a happening, and an opportunity. It should take a page from the wild success of Art Basel Miami Beach, the annual December confab. The 21-year-old event has spread like wildfire throughout the Miami metro area, igniting satellite fairs, gallery and museum exhibits and pop-ups, performances, and more.

Last year, Miami Art Week hosted 20 satellite art fairs, more than 1,200 galleries and thousands of artists.

In Miami, Art Basel has become a community-wide event, with arts ventures popping up like tulips in the spring. It takes over the town and had led to a surge in year-round arts and cultural action, from South Beach, to Wynwood, the Design District, Little Haiti and beyond.

Last year Expo Chicago was acquired by Frieze, which bills itself as "the world's leading platform for modern and contemporary art."

With encouragement from the city's powers, the new owner could expand Expo to more Chicago places and neighborhoods that have been overlooked.

It's a charge Mayor Brandon Johnson could take on, with imagination. Chicago needs new economic drivers, and even more, ways to celebrate our bounty of artistic talent in every corner of the city.