

Colon, Ambar. "At Chicago Exhibition Week, art collectors converge in search of the next big thing," *Chicago Sun Times*, 19 September 2026.

CHICAGO SUN•TIMES

BY AMBAR COLÓN, STAFF REPORTER
acolon@suntimes.com | @MeDicenAmbi
19 Sep 2026

At Chicago Exhibition Week, art collectors converge in search of the next big thing

Chicago Exhibition Week, spotlighting more than 40 galleries and creative hubs, aims to attract old, new art enthusiasts, build community and poke fun at stuffy gallery culture



Brendan Fernandes poses for a selfie during the opening reception of his exhibition "The Noise Will Sound" at Monique Meloche Gallery during Chicago Exhibition Week.

"She's a genius."

"She's gonna be famous one day." This was the chatter among audiences who gathered inside the theater this week at the Gertie Hub, 400 N. Peoria St., to see Sophie Becker perform with her ventriloquist dummy, Ronnie Woods.

Throughout the act, the pair were singing, swapping voices, creating sound effects and more.

The production, part of a show called "82 Nights Only," was one of several events happening around the kickoff week for Chicago Exhibition Week. Happening through Sunday, the event —

organized by Chicago contemporary art platform Gertie — spotlights more than 40 art galleries and creative institutions.

Many of the affiliated galleries have set up new shows that are visible through the fall, and others through next year.

The ventriloquist show is not wall art, but that was the point. The exhibition week is meant to attract old and new art lovers and collectors and poke fun at the often stuffy and unwelcoming gallery culture.

"What we're trying to do is offer a couple of different on-ramps to people," said Abby Pucker, the founder of Gertie, who is incentivizing those who visit at least four galleries to collect stickers from each and get free admission to the Museum of Contemporary Art on Sunday. "My ask to people actually is to get up and go do stuff. Be in the world, and use it as an opportunity to invite friends."

Running through Dec. 13, "82 Nights Only" features a rotating array of artists' work and performances. No one night will be anything like the last. "We want people to keep coming back," Pucker said.

"It's a little cheeky," said Chanelle Lacy, Gertie's head of programming, partnerships and memberships. "And we're in on the joke with you: We're going to bring you to this space and show you very serious, interesting contemporary art, but we're also going to laugh and have a good time and kind of poke fun at the fact that we get poked fun at."

About a mile west of the Gertie Hub on Thursday, art lovers and collectors descended upon West Town galleries to go door-to-door and get first looks at works by a mix of local and international talents.

Dancer-artist Brendan Fernandes mingled with guests who came to see his work on view at Monique Meloche Gallery (451 N. Paulina St.), while over at DOCUMENT (1709 W. Chicago Ave.), Slovakian artist Alexandra Barth's intricate awning paintings drew people in. Black Puerto Rican artist Clotilde Jiménez's colorful collage works made Mariane Ibrahim (437 N. Paulina St.) a destination. And School of the Art Institute alum Arina Erdélyi had a prominent showcase at Volume (1700 W. Hubbard St.).

Among the collectors taking advantage of the Chicago Exhibition Week opening parties was Little Village-raised Sara Toussaint, 48, who now lives in Gainesville, Florida. Toussaint agreed that developing relationships with artists and gallerists is key to building a great collection.

She and her husband have on display in their home a 2021 Jiménez piece titled "Ghetto Wizard." Toussaint said the piece, which incorporates the colors of the Puerto Rican flag, reminds her of the vibrant South Side neighborhood she grew up in.

"I don't consider Little Village a ghetto. But it was such a great place to grow up," she said. "It really impacted the rest of my life and career." Through gallerist Mariane Ibrahim, she visited Jiménez's Mexico City studio in February 2020.

"When I learned he was Puerto Rican, the work kind of gravitated towards me. At that moment I was like, 'I do want to support artists. that I feel like I can identify with and are typically under-represented,'" she said.

Toussaint, who works in sports marketing, said her advice for new collectors is to inquire about layaway plans and staggered payments and to ask artists about selling prints or other work within their price range, whether it's \$200 or \$20,000.

"I would say check out some of the art school events," Toussaint added. "If you see something you love, the next thing you know, that could be someone who grows in their career professionally."

Chicago-based collector Erinne Brown said that she purchased Erol Scott Harris' piece "Door-stop" for \$2,000 this week. At 39, she's been building her own inventory of work for the last two years.

"I started off super small, and I mean that literally," Brown said. She visited the Barely Fair during EXPO Chicago in 2024 and came across a miniature painting that "spoke to me," she said.

Over time, she began thinking "more strategically" about creating her art budget and making sure she felt connected to her collection rather than making impulsive decisions.

Originally from Maryland, Brown lived in New York City before moving to Chicago for a job.

"I didn't always feel like these types of spaces and conversations were as accessible [in New York]," she said. "Coming to Chicago, I felt it to be a very welcoming environment to really ask questions, get to know artists and feel more connected to the work."

Garett Schwindt, a Chicago-based psychotherapist who was browsing the collection at Monique Meloche Gallery on Thursday, began collecting art about 10 years ago.

"I went to an auction and accidentally bought a few pieces," he said. "I couldn't afford it at the time." But once he started living with the art, Schwindt continued, he understood he could make it an intentional pursuit.

Schwindt, 33, who stopped to chat with Fernandes at the gallery opening Thursday, said young aspiring collectors should talk to everyone and learn as much as possible this weekend and beyond. "Everybody in Chicago is gonna be so generous with their information and time."