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Learning from Bridgehampton

By Michael H. Miller 7/12 6:30pm



It hummed and whirred with the strength of several dozen generators, looming for a half mile in every direction. It was so brightly white in the midmorning sun that it seemed to glow, like some otherworldly spacecraft set down by the side of a country road.

Here was the "largest tent structure ever erected on Long Island," the 50,000-square-foot behemoth that housed the ArtHamptons art fair in

Bridgehampton this past weekend. Rick Friedman built it, and they came. They came in Mercedes Benzes and Range Rovers, in BMW convertibles and Lexus SUVs. They wore polo shirts in pastel colors. They took photographs of one another hugging the sculptures in the sculpture garden. They seemed to be having a decent time.

"You like it?" Mr. Friedman, the fair's founder and executive director, asked *The Observer* with a sly grin. "You have a beautiful weekend like this in the Hamptons and everybody's out here. We thought this would be a fine location to really bring together the luxury of the Hamptons with the beauty of serious art."

ArtHamptons had 78 booths, each priced between \$10,000 and \$16,000. Mr. Friedman expected some 10,000 guests. A second fair, the smaller artMRKT Hamptons, which was started by a few of Mr. Friedman's former employees, will open this weekend, just down the road. (Mr. Friedman told *The Observer*, "There's a lawsuit involved.") Only a mile away from the art fair circus, in a modest home rented year-round by New York gallerist Jose Martos, is curator Bob Nickas's thoughtful, edgy, sarcastically titled Bridgehampton Biennial. With this spectrum, Bridgehampton is becoming one of the most active summer spots for the art world. Mr. Friedman, who was the creator and original emcee of the progenitor of celebrity dance competition shows, the Merv Griffin-produced *Dance Fever*, said he began collecting art six years ago after purchasing a work by Abstract Expressionist painter Mary Abbott, who could be seen nearby, walking with a cane. Her Hamptons cohort once included Jackson Pollock and Willem De Kooning. *The Observer* took a seat next to Ms. Abbott at a table where she sat greeting a line of visitors eager to meet her and make contact with local art history, and asked her what she thinks of the Hamptons now.

"It's changed a lot," she said. "My friends and I, we used to stay in Hampton Springs because Southampton was too expensive. I wasn't really drawn here, I was stuck. My

grandmother was out here and as soon as my mother could get rid of us, she'd send us away to her."

The Observer asked if she had any stories about hanging out with De Kooning. "I don't know," Ms. Abbott said, pushing up an eyebrow. "What have you heard?" A lot of the artwork inside was beach-house-friendly—pictures of picnics and sailboats— or somehow representative of the ethos of people who can afford summer homes in the Hamptons: there was a blown up, framed \$100 bill by Steven Gagnon at the booth of Eckert Fine Art. Over at Jenkins Johnson was a red neon sign by Tim Etchells that read, "YOU WILL LIVE FOREVER."

Danziger Projects had two booths, one dedicated to Kate Moss's portfolio, the other occupied by a mix of photographs ranging from an image from Robert Kennedy's funeral train by Paul Fusco to a series of Warhol Polaroids. "This is not a high-cost fair so we can experiment with two booths," James Danziger said. A woman walked up carrying a dog in her purse. Mr. Danziger casually held out a pen beneath the dog's nose. It began to pant. "One other thing we like about this fair is that there are more dogs," he said. "Dogs can buy art too!" said the owner. "We've yet to sell a piece to a dog." "But in this town, you never know."

ArtHamptons's press materials argued for its status as "the quintessential Hamptons experience" for its "reenactment" in an upcoming episode of the USA Network show *Royal Pains*. The Bridgehampton Biennial was the antithesis of everything about the flashier and more commercial fair.

"I call it 'The Tick Preserve,'" Bob Nickas said. He was gesturing to the unkempt field out back of Jose Martos's house, where a flat cutout by Wayne Gonzales of a boy with a slingshot stood with his weapon aimed at the overgrowth. Nearby was a pile of crystals and mirrors, *Checkk Fluff* by Stefan Gunn. The artist had carried the work in a satchel on his back as he rode on a two-day trip from Rhode Island: he took a ferry to Block Island and a second ferry to Montauk, where he mounted his bike again, and set out for Bridgehampton. He tried out various sites in Mr. Martos's backyard before deciding on the base of a tree by the shed.

"If you get around the fact that it's so expensive and," Mr. Nickas paused, "people's attitudes," and here he flashed a look of doubt, "it's beautiful in the Hamptons." To step into the house where Mr. Nickas's Bridgehampton Biennial is showing through the beginning of September was to enter some idyllic alternate reality: artists wore swim trunks and drank from a keg of beer; the house and its clutter were nearly indistinguishable from the artworks.

There were pieces everywhere. By the pool, next to a pile of inflatable toys, a bird had relieved itself on one of Davina Semo's concrete slabs with an "X" painted across it, an intersection of art and life that pleased the artist. She was sad to hear Mr. Martos's assistant had cleaned it. In the living room, Amy O'Neill's video, *Joe's*, a dramatic montage of the backroom of a dive bar in Pennsylvania (where the owner stowed away his taxidermy obsession), played while a father cradled a young baby. "Baby's first biennial!" Mr. Nickas said. "Be careful. It's like child abuse."

Lisa Beck painted on the wall in the kids' bedroom. There was artwork all the way up to the attic, where a small screen projected a video by Trisha Donnelly. In the pool, Aaron

Suggs's "sculpture" of a sailboat (it was a real sailboat) was floating, its sail rustling in the wind. Mr. Suggs said it was the first sailboat he had ever built. He researched how to do it online.

Artworks can look dismal in an art fair booth—usually a low-rent version of the gallery's sterile "white cube" environment. They often seem to spruce up once a collector takes them home and installs them as, over time, they become part of a domestic environment. Mr. Nickas has recreated that environment and gone even further. Pieces that would seem to announce themselves immediately as art in a gallery—a fish tank full of fish, for instance, a piece in the house's front room—become, in a house, indistinguishable from nonart. It's a unique and refreshing approach.

"Artists are asked all the time to be in shows," Mr. Nickas said. "To do a piece for this and do a piece for that, but here, they can hang out for a few hours and go swimming or go to the beach, and it's more social. Social in the New York gallery world means there's a problem: the problem is, there's a show. There's another problem, which is compounded: there's an opening. So people are there. And then that gets compounded. So they kind of pour the drinks. I did that for 25 years. It didn't take 25 years for it to get old, though."

Mr. Martos will spend most weekends this summer in the house with his family. "We don't change the house at all," he said in a thick French accent. "Bob doesn't want to compromise for the art. The TV's the TV. There is an Amy O'Neill piece playing, but if the kids come home and they want to watch cartoons, they will."

The guests ate paella with fish Mr. Martos had caught the day before off of Montauk. Mr. Nickas had peeled the apples for the cobbler *The Observer* was eating. Mr. Martos suggested to the painter Chris Martin that he change into his bathing suit in the middle of the yard. (They compromised on the shed out back.) Before he jumped in the pool, we took a seat on the porch, in chairs designed by painter Mary Heilmann. Nearby hung Mr. Martin's painting, a canvas slopped with acrylic and glitter.

"I've always been interested in putting paintings out in the world," he said. "I like the idea of having something that actually gets weathered. People think paintings are so, 'Oh god don't touch it' or whatever. But paintings are pretty tough. Most of my paintings have [more] fucking around with forms in an obvious way. This one wasn't getting any better so I just signed it." "Stop talking about your fucking painting, Chris Martin!" Mr. Martos said as he walked by on the porch. "It's fucking pretentious!"

But it was just as well. *The Observer's* short tour of Hamptons art was drawing to a close. Before the taxi to the train station pulled up, four young women in pastels drove by in a yellow Jeep. They were blasting "Don't Stop Believin'" by Journey and singing along. "Some will win, some will lose," they shouted—all of their voices out of key—then disappeared down the road.

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