

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

Philly no longer an 'antiques town': City gets its first shot at contemporary art fair

By Peter Crimmins
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This weekend, dozens of art dealers from around the country will come to the 23rd Street Armory for the inaugural Philadelphia Fine Art Fair.

This will be the first time Philadelphia will host a major contemporary art fair.

Informal art fairs abound in Philadelphia, especially during the summer months when artists hawk their wares from booths in parks and plazas. But a proper contemporary art fair involves major galleries representing artists whose work can sell for tens of thousands – even millions – of dollars.

In the last several years, these art fairs have driven the global art market, to the point where many dealers give up their physical gallery spaces, using more of their resources to have a presence at art fairs.

The fair's producer, Rick Friedman, has a long history of staging art fairs in the Hamptons on Long Island; Aspen, Colorado; Palm Springs, California; San Francisco, and Houston. He believes the Philadelphia art market is ready for this.

"People say this is an antiques town. It was an antiques town, yes, for 30, 40 years. But this is also a contemporary town," Friedman said. "Most of the galleries are contemporary. The museums are showing more and more contemporary shows. The action is moving to contemporary art. Young people buying art are looking for contemporary art, not antiques."

These fairs are not cheap. One local dealer, Bridgette Mayer of Bridgette Mayer Gallery, is spending between \$15,000 and \$18,000 to participate in the fair, most of that to cover the rental of two booths on the floor of the fair.

Mayer gave birth to a baby just days before the fair, so her staff will run the booths.

Being at art fairs in other cities is part of her business model. Mayer recently stopped putting on shows in her own gallery space on Walnut Street, focusing more resources on art consulting, curating, and hosting private viewings for prospective clients.

Mayer said she's optimistic about the new Philadelphia Fine Art Fair, but cautiously so.

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“I don’t know that this city is ready, based on galleries closing, why they are closing,” she said. “A lot of galleries in Philadelphia don’t have the funds to be able to participate. You gotta take the first step. I’m interested to see what the results will be.”

In 2015, Friedman sold his art fair empire, Hamptons Expo Group, and got out of the art fair business. That didn’t last long, and the Philadelphia Fine Art Fair marks his return.

“When I retired, you can only hit so many golf balls,” he said. “This is what I really love, and it’s a chance to come back. We’re starting small, but we looked around the world. Philly scored the highest ranking that needed a show and didn’t have one.”

Friedman is already planning another art fair in September in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, the ski resort town. His art fair will be incorporated into Jackson Hole’s annual 12-day Fall Arts Festival.