

# READER

## What I saw at Expo Chicago (and suggest you see, too)

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*Vernissage* is the French word for varnishing. It also denotes a private preview of an art show. Thursday night, at Navy Pier, the Expo Chicago vernissage involved quite a lot of varnishing of one kind or another. Tony Karman, who founded what's officially known as the International Exposition of Contemporary and Modern Art, kicked things off with a little speech varnishing his clients and sponsors, a few of whom responded in kind, applying their own coats of verbal lacquer. Then everybody drank champagne made by a venerable old company with the name—weirdly unfortunate, considering the context—of Ruinart.

Inside, guests and gallerists varnished one another on an individual basis. A taut-skinned faction, obviously devoted to the cosmetological arts, even *looked* varnished. Deals were broached ("What's your best price?") and some apparently fell through ("This sucks!" one fireplug of a man opined, "and I'm gonna make sure everybody knows it!"). A clutch of large, rough-looking men with expensive suits and shiny hair looked like mafiosi at a money-laundering seminar. And octogenarian photographer Victor Skrebneski floated through it all like the doge of Venice making a progress down the Grand Canal.

Sprawling across the enormity of Navy Pier's Festival Hall, the fair seems to have its own neighborhoods. There's a run of galleries devoted, for instance, to loud, latter-day abstraction (oddly admirable in their commitment to ugliness, thickly applied), and a cool, clean ghetto where everything—speaking of varnish—looks as if it's been enveloped in a high-gloss, spray-on sealant. But there's also a good number of booths that offer touches of individuality or idiosyncrasy or wit or craft or even stories. The *Reader's* Aimee Levitt blogged about a few things that caught her eye; I especially agree with her when it comes to Sandro Miller's photographic portraits of old Cubans. Here are a few

more that you might take a look at before the expo closes Sunday at 6 PM.

If you're hoping to be awed by close proximity to modern American masters, visit the **Hill Gallery** booth, where a big Alex Katz portrait hangs at right angles to a Philip Pearlstein nude and across from a Milton Avery landscape. The **Jerald Melberg Gallery** has a loose, lovely Romare Beardon image of Ulysses. And Chicago's **Richard Norton Gallery** features restrained abstracts from the 1930s, painted by R. Leroy Turner and demonstrating what the style was once about. Leon Golub canvases are sprinkled throughout the fair and worth tracking down.

My wife is a printmaker, and when we got to the **Paul Thiebaud Gallery** we puzzled for a good while over how the gallerist's artist brother, Wayne Thiebaud, achieved a watery effect in an oddly brooding woodblock print of a cake. She also appreciated some "three-color relief" prints from Shepard Fairey's 2012 Target series. Hung on the outer wall of the **Pace Prints** booth, they integrate folk motifs into his familiar satire of authoritarian art.



· Detail of a Sanford Biggers quilt

derives its potent creepiness from the fact that all the works are hung with the eyes at the same height.

The **Robert Koch Gallery** has beautiful, horrific large-format landscapes by Hungarian photographer Tamas Dezso. One in particular is reminiscent of heroic Soviet-era images, but subverts that mode by depicting a Romanian copper mine as an empty, ruined

One of the more powerful stories at the fair is told by African-American artist Sanford Biggers. In pieces on view at the **David Castillo Gallery** booth, Biggers literally sews his own imagery into quilts from the slave-era American south. Another narrative was brought here all the way from Dusseldorf by Jens Ullrich and the **Van Horn Gallery**. Ullrich has manipulated stock news photos, introducing placards that carry intentionally undecipherable messages composed of old Letraset rub-on letters such as designers used before computer fonts came along. At once cynical and hopeful, Ullrich's compositions suggest a worldwide protest movement demanding something beyond words.

Meanwhile Chicago's **Corbett & Dempsey** and New York's **David Nolan** galleries have combined to create **Eyeline**, an exhibit of portraits that

moonscape. For sheer shock value, check out David Lezama's paintings at the **Hilario Galguera Gallery** booth; Lezama generates a grotesque personal mythology from Biblical, Greek, and ancient American sources. Also grotesque but a whole lot funnier is Lisa Yuskavage's triptych, outside the **David Zwirner Gallery** booth, suggesting Balthus as interpreted by John Currin attempting anime. And for a transcendence chaser, there are Gustavo Lacerda's photographic portraits of albinos at the **Catherine Edelman Gallery** booth.