

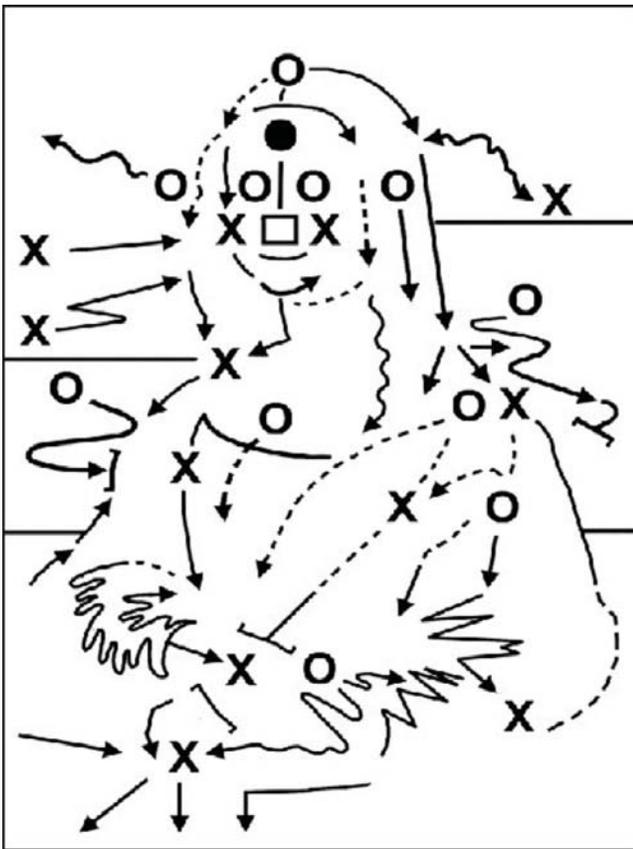
Los Angeles Times

Art

A mart for new art

Contemporary pieces will be the stock in trade at artLA, a fair aimed at filling a longstanding void.

January 23, 2005 | Suzanne Muchnic | Times Staff Writer



LG Williams
Mona Lisa (How To Explain Art To The Sports Generation), 2004
40 x 30", Vinyl and Engineer Grade Reflective Sheeting on Heavy-Duty Aluminum

With contemporary art fairs sprouting around the world and taking root from Miami to Shanghai, the arrival of a new one

may not sound particularly notable. But Stephen Cohen thinks he's onto something in artLA, a marketplace for new art that will debut Thursday night through next Sunday at the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium.

"It's very exciting," says Cohen, a Los Angeles-based photography dealer and veteran organizer of photography fairs. "We have a good mix of art: cutting-edge work, many different media, video projections, digital art, special installations by individual artists."

Southern California already has annual weekend fairs for fine-art prints, antiques and crafts in addition to Cohen's photoLA, which winds up its 14th edition today at the Santa Monica Civic. Another fair, the 10-year-old Los Angeles Art Show, has enlarged the modern and contemporary component of its mostly traditional agenda. A few hotel fairs featuring trendy art, fresh from artists' studios, have come and gone. But there hasn't been a big fair exclusively devoted to contemporary art here since 1993, when the once-vigorous annual fair at the Los Angeles Convention Center withered and died.

Cohen hopes to fill that void and fashion a niche for himself in an art world where some dealers say they do more business at fairs than at their galleries.

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"Who knows?" he muses. "Maybe this is going to be the new model for how galleries work."

Art fairs are hot -- as one-stop shopping and looking centers where collectors, dealers, curators, critics and artists catch up with art and one another. For every fair that's on the rise, several are in decline, but they continue to proliferate. Seasoned collectors seem to love traveling thousands of miles to discover new art, some of which they could have found at home. Novices who are intimidated by galleries seem to feel more comfortable in a shopping-mall environment.

"There's a thing about art fairs right now," says L.A. dealer Paul Kopeikin, whose eponymous gallery is on mid-Wilshire Boulevard. He has rented a booth at artLA -- his third fair this month, after the San Francisco International Art Expo and photoLA. Photography is Kopeikin's longtime specialty, but he also deals with contemporary art, and he'll make that point at artLA.

For younger L.A. dealers, such as Caryn Coleman of Sixspace Gallery near West 23rd and Figueroa streets, the new fair is a way of gaining exposure and experience. Hoping to introduce her artists and exhibition program to people who haven't visited the gallery, she sees the fair as a step to national recognition.

"Los Angeles is such a hotbed of new art and such a vibrant scene," Coleman says. But it doesn't have much presence at major art fairs with East Coast gatekeepers. Instead of trying to beat the system, she says, she and her peers must take the initiative and set up their own fairs at home and elsewhere.

Just how many people show up at artLA remains to be seen, but Cohen is counting on what he calls "the curiosity factor." Los Angeles' art scene has grown enormously since its last big fair petered out, he says. "We have so many influential artists, so many new galleries. We want to emphasize Los Angeles as an art destination for collectors from other cities. We also hope that L.A. collectors who go to fairs in Miami, New York and London will say, 'Hey, look what's going on here' and shop closer to home. They don't have to get patted down, take their shoes off or get on an airplane to go to this fair."

Western Project in Culver City, Faure & Light in Bergamot Station and Bank in downtown Los Angeles agreed to participate. The list grew as Cohen solicited participants in New York and at the Basel Miami and NADA fairs.

But is one more fair one too many, even in Los Angeles?

"There are a lot of them," Cohen says, "especially in Europe. A new one will open in Bologna, Italy, at the same time as artLA. But the good ones will last. Art Basel and Art Basel Miami Beach. The fair in Cologne, Germany is going to stay. The Frieze Art Fair in London looks permanent. So do the Armory Show and the Art Dealers Association of America Art Show in New York."

"Mine is a modest fair," he says, "but I think it will grow by leaps and bounds next year."