

San Francisco Chronicle

Art fair has more provincial look but shows some gems

By Kenneth Baker

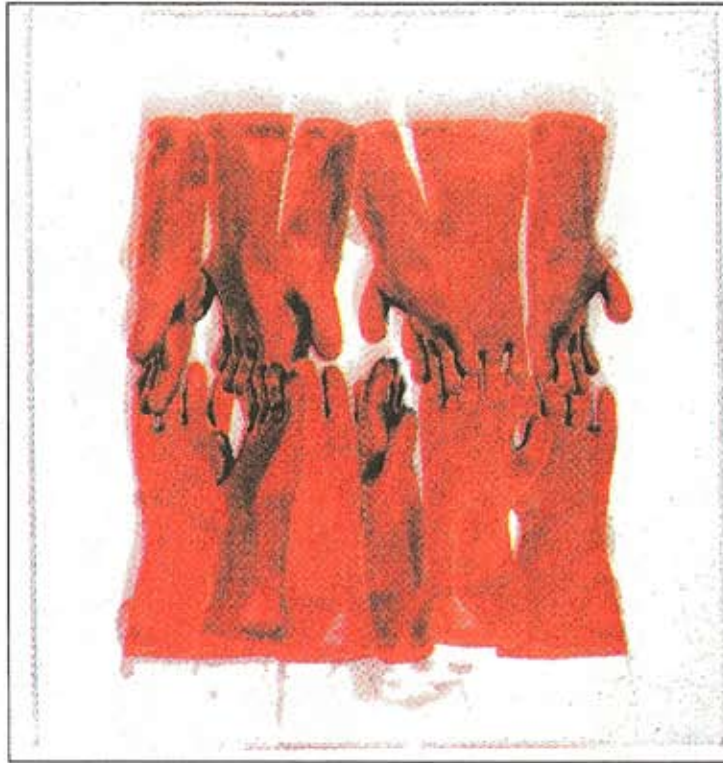
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

As the sixth annual San Francisco International Art Exposition opened Thursday evening, Chicago impresario Thomas Blackman, who makes it all possible, was already looking forward to the seventh.

He dreams of seeing it downtown, at Moscone Center, close to major hotels, galleries and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Logistical, financial and persuasion problems still block the path to that best of all possibilities. Some participants, however, in the current fair expressed surprise at hearing that Blackman has a seventh installment on his calendar.

The exposition filled two pavilions at Fort Mason in its first five years. But this time the whole show fits, a little tightly, into one. Easier for visitors to take in, no question, but there's an ominous impression of shrinkage.

The "I" might almost have been removed from the SFIAE this year, as international participation has dwindled to a handful of galleries from Korea, London and Germany. And there are no big names, such as Karsten Greve, Anthony d'Offay, White Cube or Timothy Taylor, who sold a six-figure painting on opening day here a couple of



GALLERY 16

This untitled oil on linen by Ross Bleckner (2002) is on display at the San Francisco International Art Exposition.

years ago.

Nor will visitors find New York blue chips such as Matthew Marks, Barbara Gladstone, Pace or Gagosian here. Steadfast participants such as Nancy Hoffmann, Charles Cowles, Kraushaar and Salander-O'Reilly repre-

sent the Big Apple, but convey little sense of the centrality it retains in the American art scene.

San Francisco and Northern California dealers and print publishers take up proportionally more space at this event each year, inevitably making it look

Sixth Annual San Francisco International Art Exposition: Festival Pavilion, Fort Mason, San Francisco. Through Monday. (877) 734-2399, www.sfiaie.com.

more like a provincial affair.

Blame the global more than the regional ecology of the art world. Art fairs have been on the increase around the world, each one a big gamble of money and effort for every exhibitor who participates. When the first San Francisco fair took place, plenty of dealers thought it a good bet. The dot-com boom had circulated lots of new money, and the prospect of cultivating Bay Area collectors seemed real.

But the most fashionable galleries from afar learned that ambitious collectors from here would go to them, or already were going to them. And even a glance at the number of local exhibitors — greater than now — showed how much competition already existed for the business of a narrow local collector base.

On the upside, local galleries have looked better and better as one San Francisco fair has succeeded another. The booths of regional players such as Anthony Meier, Paule Anglim, Haines, Stephen Wirtz, Crown Point Press and Arion Press would hold their own at any art fair in the

► ART: page D4

Small treasures at Fort Mason

► ART

From Page D1

world. Even some newcomers, such as San Francisco's Gallery 16, make a solid impression.

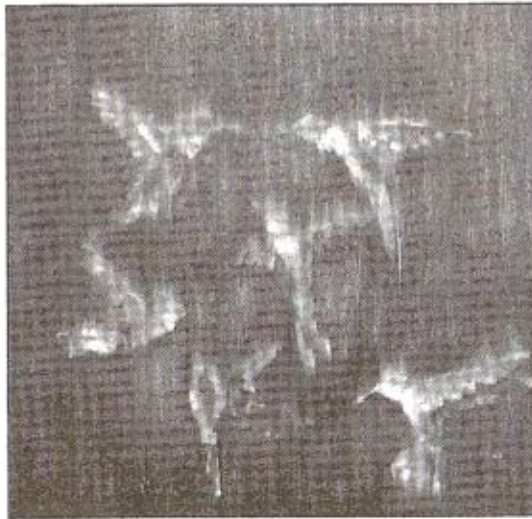
But as in previous San Francisco fairs, individual works seem more memorable. Small treasures abound, buried in plain sight in a matrix of respectable but unremarkable work.

A few jump to the eye, such as a sleek new mixed-media abstraction on Mylar by San Franciscan Nellie King Solomon at Julie Baker Fine Art of Grass Valley. Salander-O'Reilly has an odd selection of things on display, but at the center of it hangs a 1948 abstraction by Franz Kline, a rarity worth noting by anyone interested in the New York School.

John Berggruen characteristically unearths a few gems, notably a small painting, "Boy and Car" (1955), by David Park at the height of his powers, and two grand pieces by the late San Francisco painter and collagist Jess.

The small works by Gerhard Richter, Cy Twombly, Carl Andre and Gary Simmons at Anthony Meier typify the sort of thing one hopes to see in plenty at a contemporary art fair.

But dealers less familiar locally also offer some stirring surprises. No one who loves drawing



RICHARD LEVY GALLERY

"Red Handed," by Deborah Oropallo (2002), is a pigment print and oil on paper shown by Gallery 16, a newcomer from San Francisco that has a solid show at Fort Mason Center.

should miss the graphite and charcoal enigmas of Christine Hiebert shown by Philadelphia's Gallery Joe.

An example of Jaq Chartier's elegant abstract painting, based on forensic laboratory procedures, graces the booth of Elizabeth Leach from Portland.

Charles Cowles brings a cluster of unaccountably absorbing puzzle-like paintings on wood by Robert Yoder and a first-rate small blackboard picture by Vernon Fisher.

A few things on view, such as Anne Wilson's odd photographic close-ups of her dispersed sculptures at Chicago's Roy Boyd Gallery, look genuinely new. But

most of the goodies here — novel or not — are by oldies.

See the small, hot-off-the-earl Wayne Thiebaud landscapes at Paul Thiebaud's, and David Gilhooly's early '80s "Chocolate Covered Dagwood" at Elins Eagles-Smith, an endless column of a ceramic sandwich to satisfy anyone's hunger for brilliantly crafted comic relief.

E-mail Kenneth Baker at ken_nethbaker@sfchronicle.com.