

WHAT'S ON

VISUAL ARTS

Art Toronto gets its house in order

Annual fair strengthens its nationalist agenda, casting itself as a super-sized exhibition

PETER GODDARD
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

The Toronto International Art Fair celebrates its 10th anniversary Friday at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre with "Heartland," its decisive nod to Canadian art, artists and galleries.

But the flagship exhibition at Art Toronto 2009 aims to be more than just the right nationalist notion at just the right pre-Winter Olympic moment.

For Alberta-based curator Jeffrey Spalding, the all-Canuck showcase goes some way to reconfigure TIAF as an international showcase of Canadian art and not merely an art fair or snappy one-stop shopping "Heartland's" lineup — including such established newer stars as Shary Boyle and iconic historical figures such as Greg Curnoe — would be any curator's artistic A-list for an international showcase of Canadian art.

"People are busy these days," Spalding says. "The fair is an enormous opportunity for them to come in and drink in a lot of ideas."

But hold on there. TIAF should be about selling art, right? Didn't the fair let gallery owners know a while

back that its visitors/buyers were generally a well-heeled bunch whose average household income is "in excess of \$100,000?"

Bringing together some 100 galleries from 12 countries, TIAF has expectations of attracting some 18,000 visitors this weekend, the estimated number who attended last year's fair. A reported \$15 million in sales were generated that year.

This time around it's \$290 a ticket for "special" collectors to attend Thursday's afternoon preview at the convention centre of some 5,000 pieces of art, with proceeds going to the Art Gallery of Ontario. Tickets are down to \$190 for the evening preview that follows. The AGO netted \$310,000 from TIAF's early-bird specials last year.

Plans to display a "spectacular" \$500,000 Dale Chihuly piece were announced via a TIAF press release last week, adding that the multi-hued *Blue Mille Fiori* by the American glass guru "will be at Art Toronto only."

But the hyped Chihuly glitter feels like an anomaly in a year of depressed art prices when Sotheby's and Christie's auction houses have gloomy expectations about upcoming fall auctions.

This is where "Heartland" comes in. In recognition that "international travelers come to the fair," Spalding's plan — "impish" is his word for it — is to reconfigure aspects of TIAF into a super-sized exhibition. Think of Art Toronto as a biennale you can buy into.

And why not? "Over the last 10 years the fair has been a conduit to show what were the most interesting things going on in Canadian art," says Spalding, an artist and president of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts.



Geoffrey Fugen's *Untitled* (2009) from Angell Gallery is one of about 5,000 pieces of art from 100 galleries and 12 countries — with a strengthened Canadian focus — at this weekend's Art Toronto.

As his model, Spalding has in mind Documenta, the once-every-five-years contemporary art extravaganza in Kassel, Germany, begun in 1955 by curator Arnold Bode as a way of introducing broad art trends to German artists for years denied access to international art by the Nazi regime.

Equating today's Canadian art scene with Germany's 50 years ago may seem extreme, but not to Spalding.

"We need to do something dramatic," he says.

The subtle morphing of the art fair and the international art exhibition into an arts hybrid was already somewhat in evidence last week at London's Frieze Art Fair. A good many exhibitors anted up for a stall, all the while knowing that their artists may only get exposure and not sales.

One international gallery owner showing at Frieze described the fair's mood as "thoughtful."

Spalding loves that idea — the thoughtful collector. Artists haven't been alone in establishing defining

art movements, in his view. "Nor was it the dealers," he adds. "No, what made the School of Paris or the School of New York so important were the collectors. It was simply that New York had the best artists. It was because New York collectors had this complete appetite for art.

"Somehow we need to show genuine leadership for Canadian art," he says.

"Heartland" may not be it. But it's a beginning.

peter_g1@sympatico.ca

Just the facts

WHAT: Art Toronto 2009

WHEN: Public admission Friday to Monday. Preview Thursday

WHERE: Metro Toronto Convention Centre, 255 Front St. W.

TICKETS: \$14-\$18 at 416-872-1212 or www.ticketking.com