

## **Lose Your Heart to Art at the Fair**

By Cynthia Barlow Marrs SGFA

Before there was speed dating there were art fairs: you can go on your own without feeling alone, and there's no pressure to say that you like what you see. But the truth is you wouldn't mind a little love at first sight.

In both cases first impressions count.

Take the Windsor Contemporary Art Fair.

You arrive at Royal Windsor Racecourse and you're seduced by the setting. You pass through a tree-fringed meadow and across an ancient mill stream, and as you descend on the other side you're slipping through the waist of an hourglass into another world. Swans fly overhead and you're drawn down an allée of towering lime trees. As you approach the grandstand, jockeys in brilliant silks flash through your mind and you think of the racetrack paintings of Degas. Windsor Castle is just a few minutes downstream. Racing is, after all, the sport of kings.

From your first glimpse of the fair pavilion the excitement mounts. If you're there as an exhibiting artist, it's part Cinderella story. One minute you're up to your armpits in bubblewrap wrestling with wall screws and plinths, and the next you're clinking glasses at the private view.

If you're there as a visitor, you're hoping to fall in love.

That's the kind of match-making Sarah McAllister and Deborah James had in mind from the start.

"We were both working with artists, and we knew how hard it was to find good exhibition space," they say. "Of the art fairs that did exist, most were in London and catered mainly for galleries."

They also wanted to help artists and the art-loving public to develop long term relationships. As the art critic Peter Campbell says, making pictures and dealing in them is an intimate business. Where else, he asks, can you find such close connections among the makers, the buyers and the sellers?

The winning combination, in Sarah's and Deborah's view, would be a fair for contemporary art by living artists, at affordable prices, in an accessible venue outside London. Visitors and artists would meet face to face, with new entrants and seasoned players exhibiting side by side. The atmosphere would be informal, friendly and welcoming, so that both experienced and novice collectors would feel very much at home.

The first Windsor Contemporary Art Fair was organized in 2005 at breakneck speed. In just three months' time Sarah and Deborah secured Sir Christopher Wren's House Hotel as the venue, adopted the Prince's Trust as their official charity, recruited 30 exhibiting artists and launched a vigorous media campaign.

When the fair outgrew the hotel two years later, it migrated upstream to its current home at Windsor Racecourse. By 2010 the Windsor fair had spawned a sister event mid-year in Reading, and had raised more than £25,000 for the Prince's Trust. Nowadays the Contemporary Art Fairs of both Windsor and Reading are fixtures in the annual arts and entertainment calendar, attracting exhibitors and collectors from across the UK and Europe. Many of them return year after year.

And when you see the private view in full flow, it occurs to you why they do.

Spotlights and sparkling wine aside, an artist can take the simplest materials – paper, paint, canvas or clay – and, to paraphrase Campbell, transform them into something almost like a living creature; something imbued with “the magic of the unique object”. And as you look at these works of art sometimes they start to look back at you. It can feel like a kind of courtship.

One London collector makes a point of coming to the Windsor fair every year. For her, feeling anonymous is part of the appeal. So is the laid-back atmosphere. “I've found wonderful art here,” she says. “And I've developed professional relationships with artists that have deepened over time.”

If, like her, you feel the dance card in your head filling up as you cross the threshold, fair catalogue in hand, the Windsor fair just might be the place to make a good match.

With 100 stands to choose from you can play the field. Let the art fair line of dance carry you along. Stop whenever you like, or glide past and let the next person come along. There are no awkward silences to fill. Go for a drop-in workshop or demonstration, and do the circuit as many times as you like. No one will bat an eye. There are always head-turners and slow burners: some art stops you in your tracks, some art quietly draws you in. You can't always predict which work of art will set off the butterflies in your tummy that tell you you've found The One.

Just don't wait too long to commit, or the one you really love might be gone.

Go on. Have a flutter.

See you at the fair.

**Notes**

**The 2011 Windsor Contemporary Art Fair** runs from 12th to 13th November at Royal Windsor Racecourse, Maidenhead Road SL4 5JJ. The evening private view (by invitation) is on Friday 11th November (see website for private view tickets and for more details) [www.windsorcontemporaryartfair.co.uk](http://www.windsorcontemporaryartfair.co.uk)

**The Jelly** will be running hands-on workshops during the Windsor Contemporary Art Fair. Jelly are an artist-led studio and exhibition facility in the heart of Reading; a registered charity with visual arts and creative excellence at the top of their agenda. <http://jelly.org.uk>

**Peter Campbell** is resident designer and art critic at the London Review of Books. His book "*At...writing, from the London Review of Books*" is published by Hyphen Press, London (2009).

**The Prince's Trust, official charity of the Windsor Contemporary Art Fair**  
[www.princes-trust.org.uk](http://www.princes-trust.org.uk)

Every year at the fair the Prince's Trust displays 100 eight inch-square canvases by art fair artists. Each canvas is sold for £40, the proceeds going to the Trust to help disadvantaged young people from 14 to 30 years of age. The Trust provides practical and financial support, and helps young people to develop confidence, motivation and key workplace skills.

#### **Press Enquiries**

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