

## After a COVID cancellation and some controversy, the Dallas Art Fair is back — sort of

The deluxe event that art lovers from around the world are used to won't reappear until 2022, but in the meantime, 59 galleries are showing up to show what they've got.



Jamal Cyrus, "Lightnin' Field (Fulgurite sample), 2021." This piece is being shown at the 2021 Dallas Art Fair. (Jamal Cyrus)

The Dallas Art Fair never intended to play this role, but in many ways, it offers a compelling window into the peaks and valleys of recent American life. Founded in 2009, the fair began with the U.S. economy in the throes of the Great Recession.

And that was nothing compared to COVID-19.

Since its inception, the fair had thrived until April 2020, when, for the first time, the in-person fair was canceled altogether. It did eventually take place, albeit through an unexpected prism imposed by a global pandemic.

To use a word we have come to know all too well, it went virtual.

On Friday, Nov. 12, the in-person fair will reopen to the public. But because of the lingering effects of the coronavirus, this version is dramatically scaled down.

Ninety-six galleries from around the world were scheduled to attend the 2020 fair. Eighty-four opted to participate in the virtual event. But this year? The fair will welcome 59 galleries — a drop of almost 39% from those initially booked for 2020 — with only nine jetting in from five foreign countries.

Even that poses a challenge. The White House recently announced that international travel restrictions will hover until Nov. 8, when historic barriers that had barred much of the world from entering the U.S. for as long as 21 months will finally come to an end.

Even with the guardrails being lifted, international travel has weathered new travails in recent days, with travelers stranded for days in U.S. airports because of labor strife at American Airlines.

That's why Kelly Cornell, the director and vice president of the Dallas Art Fair, says with a laugh, "I can only worry about so much, and air traffic control is beyond my reach."

What she and other fair executives have had to worry about is precautions. For that reason, anyone attending or showing art at the fair will have to provide proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test, and everyone must be masked at all times.

Because the spread of COVID-19 is more pernicious indoors than out, some may be heartened to learn that the 2021 Dallas Art Fair will offer two works in the great outdoors.

The House Our Families Built, an off-site public art installation by Brooklyn-based social practice artist Caledonia Curry (better known as "Swoon") will be unveiled at Klyde Warren Park, which is making its art fair debut.



Swoon, "The House Our Families Built (Brooklyn Bridge Park)," 2021. This piece is being shown at the 2021 Dallas Art Fair. (Tod Seelie)

It Is Time, a flashing neon installation by Texas-based interdisciplinary artist Alicia Eggert, will be presented outside the fair main's entrance by Dallas' Liliana Bloch Gallery. Eggert's piece is being commissioned, according to fair officials, "by TED's global initiative to create a series of urgency about climate change."

Speaking of climate change, fair officials recently took a bold stand for the first time ever on a divisive social issue. They have pledged \$50,000 to Planned Parenthood as a protest against the Texas abortion law.

Such a stand "has risks and implications," Cornell says, "but we're proud that we decided to do it and stand up for our beliefs."

Politics notwithstanding, Cornell blames the delta variant for the in-person fair not taking place in April 2021. The variant triggered a spike in recent COVID-19 cases, despite millions of Americans being vaccinated.

"We really wanted to have something in 2021, and we were driven to do that," she says. "We wanted to be cautious. Our November fair is close to the next fair in April 2022, but we're excited to try out this time of year."



Audi Dorsey, "Blue-collar brother," 2021. This piece is being shown at the 2021 Dallas Art Fair.(PEPE fotografia)

At its peak, the Dallas Art Fair had become one of the city's biggest social events, luring collectors and dealers from all over the world. In its prime, it was the cool place to be, as high-profile art fairs all over the world had become, until COVID-19 emerged as a worldwide threat.

"Art fairs in general are social events," Cornell says. "They're community-driven events, where all of the players in the art community can interact. Where great ideas are born, and great shows are conceived. You have your artists, your galleries, your museum curators, your supporters, your collectors. Where everyone can be together, which doesn't happen on, say, Thursday afternoon at a gallery."



Alicia Eggert, "IT IS TIME," 2021. Made in collaboration with David Moinina Sengh. This piece is being shown at the 2021 Dallas Art Fair. (Liliana Bloch Gallery)

But, of course, it ground to a halt in 2020, and not everyone was happy with how the Dallas fair handled its in-person cancellation. Dozens of gallerists complained about not being reimbursed for booth fees they'd already paid.

Cornell contends that the matter has been resolved, with the Dallas Art Fair offering “credits” to disgruntled gallery owners — with a 50% limit being applied to the 2021 event and the remainder to a future fair.

When the controversy erupted in August of last year, Nancy Whitenack, the owner of Dallas’ Conduit Gallery, was among those who spoke out.

“I think it is absolutely unfortunate and wrong that the Dallas Art Fair hasn’t repaid booth fees for galleries that have paid in full in advance and have been told that they are not getting their refund,” Whitenack said in 2020, noting at the time that hers was among the galleries scheduled to appear at the 2020 fair, despite the fact that she had not yet paid for a booth.

Interviewed this past week, Whitenack says Conduit Gallery will be among the participants at the November fair.

“If gallerists are OK with the 50-50, and they feel like they’re getting their money back, then I’m glad they’ve worked that out. I’ll be going to the November fair, because I want to support Dallas. I want to support a fair that I hope has learned a big lesson. And I think they have.”

There is, she says, “such a pent-up desire for being with art and seeing art for real that I’m anticipating we will get a good turnout.”



Mimmo Scognamiglio Artecontemporanea, Adolf Tafadzwa Tega, "Untitled," 2021. This piece is being shown at the 2021 Dallas Art Fair.(Mimmo Scognamiglio Artecontemporanea)

When it comes to the financial ennui surrounding the 2020 cancellation, Cornell says: “I won’t lie — it has been difficult, but we’ve managed to work through it. We’re not the only fair that has made that its policy. It comes down to business. If we had made a different choice, we would be out of business, and then galleries would have no opportunity to come and engage with Dallas’ collecting community.”

Cris Worley, who has owned Cris Worley Fine Arts since 2010, has shown at every Dallas Art Fair except its inaugural event in 2009. Worley calls it an opportunity of “great outreach.”

She values the “concentrated, focused time frame” that gives people the chance “to see a lot of galleries, all at the same time.” It lets her see “people we haven’t seen for a long time,” to meet “new collectors and dealers across the U.S. and across the globe. It broadens your horizons all the way around.”



Cris Worley poses for a portrait at Cris Worley Fine Arts in Dallas Feb. 27, 2015. (Nathan Hunsinger / Staff Photographer)

Even so, some galleries choose not to go to the fair. Kenneth Craighead, the co-owner of Craighead Green Gallery in the Dallas Design District, has never shown at the Dallas fair. Craighead relocated his gallery from Uptown to the Design District 14 years ago and chose to buy, not rent. Brilliant move. Real estate prices in the Design District have risen dramatically since the early 2000s. In keeping with being prudent, Craighead now makes it a general policy to skip art fairs. In his view, it isn't a good investment, saying the fees they charge are simply too high.

"Art fairs are very expensive, to say the least," he says, branding them too risky a gamble. "With art fairs, you do gamble, because you don't know if you're going to sell anything or everything." How high are the costs of showing at art fairs, not just Dallas? Craighead responds with a laugh, saying, "It's like they're going to take your first-born — plus seven."

Nevertheless, until COVID-19 intervened, fairs around the world had risen dramatically in stature and strength, Cornell says, conceding that the pandemic "has slowed that down," creating in effect a kind of bear market for art fairs, which for years had enjoyed a soaring wave that amounted to an ongoing "bull" market.



Daniel Gonzalez, "Play hard or go home." This piece is being shown at the 2021 Dallas Art Fair.(Daniel Gonzalez)

Normally, the number of international galleries booked at the fair is, she says, 40%. This year's nine coming from abroad represent barely 15% of the total 59.

Among other changes, the fair will not be holding its usual pre-event gala. What it's hosting instead is "a VIP Day" on Thursday, Nov. 11, when some guests will be allowed a sneak preview.

Will the fair be economically compromised by its truncated edition?

Cornell pauses before answering.

"We're looking forward to having the fair return to its normal size, in April 2022," when she hopes for at least 100 galleries. "There are a ton of factors involved, but we still see this November event as becoming a successful fair."

Successful in this case means local, with more area galleries participating than usual. Some North Texas galleries are setting up booths for the first time. They include Keijsers Koning, which plans to move its existing gallery from New York to Dallas by opening a new space in the city's Riverbend complex in early 2022.

What exactly is the point of an art fair?

"To be a connector," Cornell says. "We facilitate relationships, between collectors, curators, galleries and artists." It's "a convenient way" to experience a wide volume of contemporary art in Dallas' "constantly evolving" collecting community, which demands "those connections, those relationships."

But for well over a year now, they have not been able to enjoy them, as they had in the past. Cornell hopes the downsized version of 2021 will at least be the bridge to recovery — if, that is, COVID-19 allows it to be.

### **Details**

The 13th annual Dallas Art Fair will open to the general public from Nov. 12 through Nov. 14 at Fashion Industry Gallery, 1807 Ross Ave. in Dallas. Hours: 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Friday and Saturday, noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. An "Early Access Champagne Soirée" will take place from 4 to 8 p.m. on Thursday, Nov. 11. For ticket prices and other information, visit [dallasartfair.com](http://dallasartfair.com). Proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test is required. Masks must be worn at all times.

— Michael Granberry