

**February 24-25, Naples National Art Festival, Naples.** Contact: Richard Sullivan, PO Box 990, Naples, FL. 34106; Phone: 239-293-9448. Email: [boulderbrook@comcast.net](mailto:boulderbrook@comcast.net). Website: [www.boulderbrookproductions.com](http://www.boulderbrookproductions.com) Application fee: \$32. Space fee: \$350-\$1,050. Space size: 10 X 10 to 10 X 30. 100% outdoors. Exhibitors: 284. Attendance: 40,000 (2006 gate). Admission: \$3.

## **By Cameron Meier**

SA Editor

Naples has more great art shows per capita than any other city in the country, and the National is the granddaddy of the bunch. If it's not the best art show in the state, you'd be hard-pressed to find any that are better. Although sales seemed a bit off this year (in keeping with the overall circuit trend), the show was an impeccably produced and sublime art experience for show-goers as well as many exhibitors.

The National features 284 of the nation's best artists arranged on Eighth Street and in Cambier Park. Although the park layout is a bit confusing, from an aesthetic standpoint it's more pleasing than one could possibly hope for, with booths tastefully arranged among the trees. And the musical selections add just the right ambience without overwhelming the art. The same can also be said for food booths, which are confined to the major traffic intersections on the street.

Many artists prefer the street because the crowds are larger, but the dedicated buyers (especially those with more eclectic tastes) definitely find their way into the park. In fact, according to show director Richard Sullivan, many artists in the past who initially requested a street spot ended up being pleasantly surprised by their success in the park, and that's mainly because the balance of mediums and juxtaposition of booths is impeccable.

Advertising is also one of the show's strong suits, thanks again to Sullivan. Foregoing some media outlets that draw attention of only browsers, the promoter instead utilizes *The New York Times* and NPR and other outlets to attract the most desirable demographic. Much of Naples crowd is wealthy and sophisticated, and Sullivan does all he can to reach those folks, He even takes some of the money that other top shows might use to pad artists' award money and funnels it to advertising.

No show is perfect, even the National. Although attendance was as healthy as ever and the weather was magnificent, the consensus was that business was slightly off, most likely because of market trends and the overall economic climate. A surreal sculptor with great work was down about 20 percent from 2006, but most of the artists we received feedback from said they would return, even if their sales were not magnificent. And considering that I spoke with dozens at the show and heard from a dozen more in the form of *FastAudits*, I was able to get a fairly clear picture of the event. And the picture was rosy.

Sales rated a seven out of ten on *FastAudits*, very good but not fantastic. However, the average take of our auditors was \$14,685, higher than almost any other show that SA has reviewed this year. So it's obvious that exhibitors come into this event with incredibly high expectations. For instance, a jeweler made \$47,000 but gave that total only a seven. A more sensible assessment came from a watercolor artist who made \$30,000. The latter rated sales a 10+.

SA's Donna Wilson, who exhibited her paper collage this year, said the National was always a strong show and that this year was no different. It has "excellent-caliber work, with a great balance [and] great patrons with deep pockets, though [they are] conservative in their tastes," she said. "What's not to like?"

Complaints regarding anything other than sales were few. The only negatives I experienced as a show-goer were the limited amount of affordable food choices. Sullivan reported that the event is situated in a busy downtown area of Fifth Avenue and there are so many excellent food choices nearby that the show has never really made food a major attraction.

Most artists had no complaints with parking and load-in/-out procedures. Although the majority of exhibitors were in the park and had to dolly a bit, they were able to park fairly close to their booths. (I wish the same could be said for patrons, who often had to search the nearby streets for open spots. Hint: If you drive a couple of blocks west to Tin City, spots are much easier to find.)

Accommodations can be tricky. If money is no object (and because you're busting your butt on the show circuit, it probably is), try the Inn on Fifth or the Trianon. But book early. If you're on a more limited budget, you'll have to go slightly farther afield, but you still must book early. Just make sure to avoid the Red Roof Inn on Davis Blvd. (It's an understaffed dump.) Likewise, avoid some of the cheaper eateries, such as C.J.'s Bar and Grill at the Dockside Boardwalk. Go instead for the Dock at Crayton Cove and other establishments that seem to have a loyal following, that is, unless you feel like impersonation Jack Nicholson from the diner scene in *Five Easy Pieces*.

Most of all, whether you're a patron or an exhibitor, have fun and see as much art as possible. And be proactive with your selling. If you make it into the show, you're already one of the best artists in the country. Now you just have to convince your wealthy customers of that.

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