

Monday, October 8, 2007

## Art yacht stays afloat on cash and class



ARIELLA BUDICK | ariellabudick@newsday.com

When I first heard about SeaFair, the multi-floor emporium of art, jewelry and antiques packed into a roving mega-yacht, I was doubtful. It sounded cheesy, like an unholy mix of Las Vegas kitsch and upscale ostentation. The promotional copy, promised “privileged guests” access to “international fine art dealers amidst gourmet restaurants, a champagne/caviar lounge, and spacious sky deck.” All of which suggested that this 228-foot floating superstore exists to convince the semi-cultivated rich to part with their money.

SeaFair’s art yacht, gaudily named the Grand Luxe, made a five-day stop in Port Washington last week and is now plying the Long Island Sound, calling on New York City and Westport, Conn., before wending its way to Miami Beach for the country’s largest fair, Art Basel Miami, in November. (It will be in New York City in the spring and back in Port Washington and the Hamptons next summer.) Landlocked fairs, you see, require collectors to travel, while SeaFair, according to its founder, Naples, Fla.-based David Lester, “brings dealers directly to collector’s residences and seasonal homes.” Its target audience isn’t the seasoned connoisseur seeking that obscure object of desire but the newly minted millionaire in a rush to appoint the villa.

Still, as I approached the enormous boat looming above the Port Washington marina like a cruiser on steroids, I couldn’t help but be impressed. SeaFair signals its ambitions by dint of scale alone. Moving up the gangplank and into the lush interior where the Nassau County Museum of Art was holding its annual benefit, I saw right away that I was wrong, at least about the tackiness.

SeaFair is classy. Most of the galleries that have signed on with Lester, while not cutting edge, are high-toned and respectable. I didn’t see installation art, video, or any of the fashionable contemporary work that might challenge, disturb or disrupt the sedate comfort of the place. Instead, there were objects - touchable, textured, colorful, gleaming, ownable objects guaranteed to start the flow of desire.

Iliad Antik, a gallery based in Manhattan, had a stunning booth filled with Biedermeier and art nouveau furniture, Hungarian modernist paintings, Cycladic figurines and

an Egyptian relief. Everything reflected the exquisite taste and idiosyncratic passions of its two partners in love and business, Andrea Zemel and Adam Brown, who scour Eastern Europe for the works of obscure masters.

Galleries pay \$10,000 to \$30,000 a week to exhibit, depending on how much square footage they occupy, Lester says, plus the costs of transporting, insuring and installing their wares. The investment can pay off with a single million-dollar sale, of course, but often what happens later matters more than the onboard transactions. “The real sales come in when clients work with their interior designers,” Brown says.

Upstairs on Deck 2, I was spellbound by the vibrant colors and mesmeric patterns of pre-Columbian textiles offered by William Siegel, who operates out of Santa Fe. Siegel, too, sees SeaFair as an opportunity to collect collectors. At the ship’s debut in Greenwich, Conn., he explained, “I introduced this material to 50 people, who were blown away. Maybe five will come to Santa Fe. If one turns into a loyal client, it will have been worth it.”

While the merchandise sprawled over three levels, the party crowd congregated mostly on the main deck. That’s where I met Dr. Harvey Manes, who said he hailed from Old Westbury, Manhattan and Westhampton, and who acquires everything from caveman art to postmodernist photos. (He recently lent a Pieter Breugel painting to the Nassau museum.) Manes was enthusiastic about the offerings and the atmosphere: “I think there’s some really quality work here, and I’m almost ready to purchase a couple of pieces,” he said. “There’s great art, great food and great company.”

Later, alone on the moonlit sky deck, where a baroque concerto competed with the sound of lapping water, it occurred to me that all this came free - something that can’t be said for \$20-a-ticket art fairs, or for most museums. Despite the elitist pretensions and deluxious aura, anyone can walk on board and bathe in the fantasy of owning an art-filled yacht. SeaFair is a populist experience masquerading as an exclusive one.

*SeaFair is at Chelsea Piers this week Oct 10-14. To attend, please call 239.908.2544 or logon to [www.expoships.com/RSVP](http://www.expoships.com/RSVP).*