



# Silicon Valley Contemporary Art Fair Hopes the Tech Sector Will Bite

Benjamin Sutton, Monday, April 7, 2014

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Soo-in Yang's *Idea Tree* (2013) outside the San Jose Convention Center. Photo: Daniel Garcia, 2013.

This week the tech industry and the art market will finally meet. Although a few tech moguls have sought out art for years—Microsoft's [Paul Allen](#) and [Bill Gates](#) being the computer industry's best-known collectors—dealers have never ventured into Silicon Valley. Until now.

The inaugural [Silicon Valley Contemporary](#) (SVC) art fair, the latest franchise from the [Hamptons Expo Group](#)—which also runs [ArHamptons](#), the [Houston Fine Art Fair](#), the [Palm Springs Fine Art Fair](#), and [ArtAspen](#)—opens at the San Jose Convention Center this Thursday, April 10. But unlike in those other cities, where there are established communities of discerning collectors, part of the challenge of tackling Silicon Valley is not only to draw out existing collectors but also to inspire new ones.

"I know a lot of these guys who maybe cashed out in the 1980s, '90s, or early 2000s—a lot of guys—they made their money, and what are they doing with it? You can only buy so many Teslas," Rick Friedman, [Hamptons Expo Group's](#) president, told [artnet News](#) over the phone. "Art is certainly a viable option. So the idea was Hey, let's introduce this option in a serious way."

Silicon Valley Contemporary's first outing certainly has all the makings of a serious fair. The lineup of 52 galleries includes some of the biggest from New York's Lower East Side—[UNTITLED](#) and [The Hole](#) among them—major Bay Area outfits like [Altman Siegel Gallery](#) and [Gallery 16](#), as well as a healthy international contingent that includes London's [Fine Art Society](#) and Toronto's [Stephen Bulger Gallery](#). And then of course there's [Pace Gallery](#), which will not only be showing [Tara Donovan's](#) largest pin drawing to date in the fair's VIP lounge, but is opening [a pop-up location](#) in nearby Menlo Park the week after the fair, where the gallery will show works by [Alexander Calder](#).

"A lot of people have been sitting in Oakland, sitting in San Francisco, sitting in Los Angeles, peering out into the Silicon Valley region for 10 years, saying: How do I get a vision of art to these guys? Nothing happens," Friedman recounted. "All of a sudden we do this show, people come in, and all of a sudden Pace says, 'Okay, Rick, this is great, we're going to commit to the show, we're gonna embrace it, and we're going to open up a place in Menlo Park.' Talk about jumping to the front of the parade."



This sign welcomes visitors to the main building of the Googleplex in Mountain View, California. Photo: Coolcaesar, via Wikimedia Commons.

While dealers have turned out in large numbers to try to crack into what is presumed to be a dormant community of potential big-time collectors, it remains to be seen whether those buyers will show up. Part of the challenge for Friedman and his team has been infiltrating Silicon Valley's strange community (or anti-community) of closed-off corporate campuses. Thousands of the fair's target attendees are bused south from San Francisco every morning, spend all day in their company's compound, and then go back north in the evening without ever setting foot outside company territory.

"They block the outside and you can't get in to them, so we're working on that," Friedman said. "And that's taken a long time, it's a challenge, and it's something that happens there that doesn't happen in other places around America where we do shows. So a big part of our campaign plan has been distributing tickets through corporations. And we've got them—Cisco, Semantic, Facebook, Google; 30 to 50 corporations have taken tickets and are distributing them internally. So we'll see how that works out."

But even if that works, and thousands of staff from Facebook, Google, and other assorted tech types turn up at the San Jose Convention Center this week, that brings up another major unknown: What sort of art will they want to buy? Will they even want to buy art?



Cisco Systems Building 2 at the San Jose main campus. Photo: Coolcaesar, via Wikimedia Commons.

"It does bring up interesting questions about the idea of collectorship. In the tech space there is a particular trend toward an ownerless society," [Gallery 16's](#) codirector [Griff Williams](#) said. "We no longer buy music, software, we subscribe. . . . And images of every work of art ever made are currently available online. So there may be a question about shifting values that may be affecting the next generation of art enthusiasts and the way they interact with artwork."

Assuming Silicon Valley's thousands of potential collectors are open to buying art, the challenge for dealers will be figuring out what type of work will entice them to take the plunge. Slick video and new media art? Hip and gritty street art? Comfortingly tactile painting, with its blue chip, old-money associations? Or perhaps photography is best suited to this exceptionally visually-literate set?

"Everybody perceives it differently, and I think that's really the ultimate question: What are people buying there? It's really hard to say," Friedman said. "A lot of people are placing bets in different areas. One is video art and digital presentations; that's the epicenter of where it was invented and developed. A lot of people are saying, No, it's really about street art, let's show street art—certain companies are already buying and investing in street art. Others have said it's a great market for prints, because before people start buying a lot of expensive paintings, maybe they buy prints. I don't really know the answer."

There's a lot riding on that answer. Assuming at least some participating dealers get it right, Silicon Valley Contemporary could usher a whole new set of discerning and deep-pocketed collectors into the art world. At least that's the dream.

"There already are some serious collectors there, there are already people who are very into it, and we're just hoping to expand it," Friedman said. "Just like [Art Basel Miami Beach](#) went down to Miami, there were already collectors there, but when they came in they really accelerated the whole world of collecting there. Maybe we'll do the same. There was a base, there are collectors, but now maybe it's going to explode over the next two or three years, that's what we're really hoping for."

[Silicon Valley Contemporary](#) runs April 10-13 at the San Jose Convention Center. Check back throughout the week for [artnet News's](#) coverage from the fair.

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