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In San Francisco, the art tribes and clans celebrate

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No T-shirts and fanny packs for these visitors. European spectacles perched on their noses, suitcases stuffed with architect-designed glad rags, art dealers, artists and art lovers from all over the country converged in San Francisco over the weekend, mostly for festivities surrounding the opening of the new San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

There were so many artist/gallerist/curator parties around town on Thursday night, April 28, that many guests arrived at Jeffrey Fraenkel's Mission Bowl soiree in cocktail attire. Some switched identities upon entering, rising immediately to the challenge of re-utilizing skills that had peaked in middle school, doffing high heels in favor of bowling shoes. Artist Katy Grannan, whose photo portrait of President Obama would be on Sunday's New York Times magazine cover, was one of those in heels, which she gamely removed for barefoot bowling. In Big Lebowski circles, this would no doubt be taboo; in art circles, however, flouting the rules is mandatory.

Barry McGee, whose early career was about tagging, bowled too; so did designer Stanlee Gatti; art dealer Jessica Silverman; art collectors Cathy and Ned Topham, Carla Emil and Rich Silverstein and Randi and Bob Fisher; restaurateurs Lindsay and Michael Tusk; and Berkeley Art Museum Director Larry Rinder and David Winton, president of the San Francisco Film Society board, who claimed that he had the top score not only of anyone in his lane but of anybody there. Who was to argue?

The individual “players,” that is, anyone who stepped up to the lane for a whole game or a few frames, were artists; they stayed up there all evening, no matter who stepped up to the alley. On the lane in which I was to bowl, Tiffany Harker of the Fraenkel Gallery had good reason to take pride in bowling a strike. She was bowling in behalf of “Diane Arbus,” and it’s her job at Fraenkel to be a liaison to the photographer’s estate. P.S. As to the non-bowlers, it was said that the father of Helen Schwab, pillar of the San Francisco art community, owned a bowling alley in Midland, Texas.

For weeks, events quiet and splashy have given fellow travelers/cousins not often in touch the chance to clink glasses or share a meal as part of the art family. At Fort Mason Center for the Art Market San Francisco preview on Wednesday night, April 27, which benefited the Fine Arts Museums, I learned that Max Hollein, set to become museums director on June 1, had been in town the week before and had attended a donors’ dinner at SFMOMA, accompanying museums board chair Dede Wilsey.

The Art Market, at which so many local and out-of-town galleries were together in one place for the weekend, enabled visitors in one fell swoop to visit the galleries that have migrated from the once-centralized Union Square district to the Tenderloin and DoReMi (Dogpatch, Potrero Hill, Mission).

At Wednesday’s preview, many of the San Francisco galleries (Ever Gold, Brian Gross, Rena Bransten, Nancy Toomey, Catherine Clark, one of the first to migrate) were exultant about their new digs. Some artists were doubly represented, by San Francisco dealers and New York galleries. (In one multi-institutional example, the artist Hung Liu was shown by Rena Bransten and by the Nancy Hoffman Gallery in New York, which in September will exhibit her work based on Depression photographs, many of which she found in the Dorothea Lange archives at the Oakland Museum of California.)

We paused for Michele Pred’s “My Body My Business” vanity at Hoffman; Dave Eggers’ “Crucial Artwork Involving Animals and Politics,” droll drawings at the Jules Maeght Gallery; and Nina Katchadourian’s “Under Pressure,” a selfie video installation shot in an airplane restroom, in which the artist, posed as an image from a Flemish portrait, responds to the Queen song of the same name. Strolling through the exhibition, it was inevitable to cross paths with grim-faced Stephen Whisler, walking the aisles pulling a cart on which rested a brushed metal sculpture of a bomb.

Early in the evening, Whisler refused to respond to stares from surprised onlookers. Later on, he loosened up. “I’m sort of trying not to break character too much,” he said, pausing to reflect on that challenge. “But who cares?”