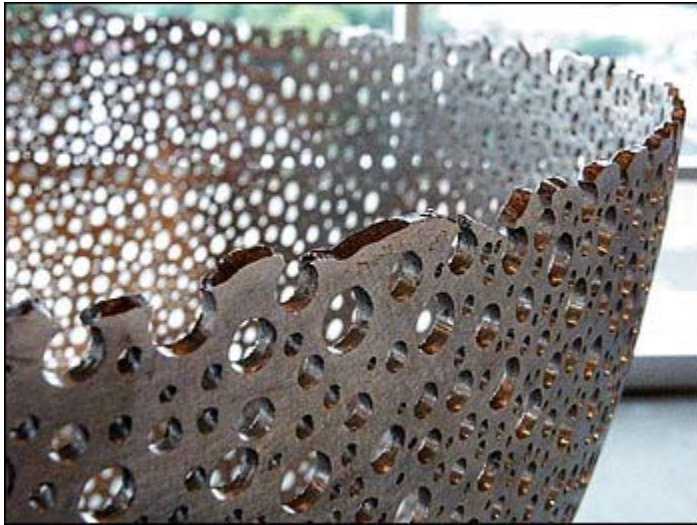


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## Artomatic '09: Survival Tips From an Expert

By Michael O'Sullivan  
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Ten years ago, it was almost impossible to imagine much of a future for Artomatic, a non-juried hodgepodge of art that was spawned in an empty industrial space that once housed a laundry. At the time, it seemed wildly optimistic -- maybe even a little crazy -- to try to fill 90,000 square feet with art by anyone who wanted to show it.

Yet fill it they did. "We didn't have a vision," laughs George Koch, an artist who had a hand in organizing the original 1999 show and now presides as chairman of Artomatic's board. "All we had was an empty building."

Vision or not, Artomatic resurfaced, again and again, in one or another empty building around town: the old Hechinger's hardware store in Tenleytown (2000); the former Capital Children's Museum (2004); an office tower in Crystal City (2007). Last year's version, in the NoMa neighborhood north of Massachusetts Avenue NW, drew a record 52,500 visitors. The current incarnation opened last week in a new building atop the Navy Yard Metro. And it's huger than ever, with a whopping 275,000 square feet of exhibition and performance space spread over eight floors and participation by more than 1,000 artists.

How do you handle that much art, good and bad? We went straight to the expert.

Washington collector Philip Barlow has never missed an Artomatic. The collection that he and his partner, Lisa Gilotty, have amassed since 1990 features about 300 works by roughly 180 artists, the vast majority of whom are local. Although Barlow, 49, has bought art directly from Artomatic only once, he figures that at least a quarter of the artists in his collection have shown there. He uses the show not just to keep abreast of the artists he likes, but also to discover new ones to follow.

If you're thinking of following in his footsteps, Artomatic is a great place to start collecting. Prices range from about \$25 to upward of \$2,500, with the majority on the lower end.

In fact, Barlow is a bit of an ironman when it comes to this sort of thing. "I have a lot of stamina for looking at art," he says. "You will probably tire before I do."

We took up that challenge, following him around Artomatic, over the course of four hours, with a notepad. Herewith are some of his survival tips, observations and commentary.

*Where do I begin?* Barlow doesn't use one of the maps handed out at the door, preferring to start on the top floor and work his way down. If you're a newbie, he recommends checking the list of artists for names you might recognize, and heading to those floors first. If you've got only an hour, pick a single floor (just get off the elevator at random, if necessary), and concentrate all your time there. Don't waste it trying to rush through the whole thing, unless you know you'll be coming back for a second visit. In that case, use your first tour to take in the show quickly, making a note of where you'll want to spend more time when you return.

*Any specific recommendations?* A couple: If you like art glass, you're in luck. Check out floors 8 and 9 for local glass artists. On floors 5 and 6, you'll find dozens of British glass artists from Sunderland, where there's a well-known glass school. One of the best is Stephen Reveley (floor 5, area 02), an artist who makes sculptural objects out of melted laboratory pipettes. For a funkier, graffiti-inspired aesthetic -- or just a good bargain -- make a beeline for floor 2, area 14. There you'll find a number of artists associated with Art Whino, a local gallery that specializes in that often highly affordable style.

*What should I bring?* Barlow's No. 1 rule (more important even than comfortable shoes): Take a friend. That way, you double the odds that you, or your buddy, will stumble across something cool and draw the other's attention to it. "If you go alone," he says, "you're going to miss something."

*Okay, I've got a friend with me. How long is this going to take?* That's entirely up to you, Barlow says, but pace yourself. Artomatic is not a museum. Don't treat it as such. If you don't like something at first glance (and there's lots you won't), trust your gut and move on. The single biggest cause for disappointment is unrealistic expectations, he says. "Be

willing to look at -- or at least to pass by -- work you don't like while you search for something you do."

*What can I expect?* In addition to lots of glass and graffiti art, photography is always well represented. This year is no exception. But be prepared to see the same, sometimes wacky subject, over and over. "That's the funny thing about Artomatic," Barlow says. "You'll see something you don't see every day, and then you'll see three or four more of them." This year's recurring themes, as identified by Barlow, include photographic essays on fire dancers; Obama portraiture; sculpture made from recycled toys and computer parts; and naked people.

*Speaking of that, what's the show rated?* Signs warn that some of the art is inappropriate for kids, and they mean it. Visitors younger than 18 are expected to be accompanied by an adult. For some reason, most of the nudity is concentrated on the lower floors. Halfway through the show, Barlow observed that there seemed to be far fewer pictures of "women without their tops on" this year. By the time he had finished the show, he wanted to take it back. "I'd say the nudity is about on a par with previous years."

*Okay, spill it: So who does the collector like?* Barlow wouldn't give a Top 10 list or even a favorite floor. But he did express interest in -- or lingered longingly in front of -- the work of several artists. Here's a partial list of his favorites:

Floor 9: Jessica Van Brakle.

Floor 8: Jared Davis, Nikolas R. Schiller.

Floor 7: Jeremy Arn.

Floor 6: Jen Dixon.

Floor 5: Mark Jude, Meinir Wyn Jones, Stephen Reveley, Michael Enn Sirvet, Steve Strawn.

Floor 2: Drew Graham, Kate McGovern.

Still, Barlow cautions against using his taste alone as a guide, adding that the secret to Artomatic's success is volume, volume, volume. "There's just so much stuff here that I can practically guarantee that something's going to be new or interesting," he says. "To someone."

*Artomatic 2009 Through July 5 at 55 M St. SE (Metro: Navy Yard, west entrance)*  
*Contact:* <http://www.artomatic.org>. *Hours:* Open Wednesdays, Thursdays and Sundays from noon to 10 p.m.; Fridays and Saturdays from noon to 1 a.m. *Admission:* Free. Parking is limited; since Artomatic can get crowded on weekends, taking the Metro is strongly encouraged.

