

## ART



## Kennedy's New Frontier

The main family business may be politics, but Robert's boy Chris is the art world's new favorite son.

By PETER PLAGENS

**C**HRIS KENNEDY IS ONE OF those Kennedys. You see it when you look at him—that shock of hair, those prominent teeth. You can hear it when you talk to him, too. Not just in his Boston accent and the pause-and-burst verbal cadence that's a ringer for his father, Bobby, but also in the way he looks at the world through the particular prism of fabulous wealth fused to a social conscience. Ask him if this is a good time to open a business, and he says, "There's been a tremendous growth recently in people with annual incomes of over \$200,000 a year," says Kennedy, 44. Another Kennedyesque pause. "The growing gap isn't good for the country."

It isn't, however, all that bad for him. In Chicago, Kennedy's adopted hometown, he's the CEO of the Merchandise Mart, the trade-show packager that's so huge its building downtown has its own ZIP code. But in the past few years, he has quietly become the largest producer of contemporary-art fairs in the world. The Mart also owns the Art Chicago fair, which opens this week, as well as New York's Armory

Show, the Toronto International Art Fair and a handful of others. "When I was in high school and working on my uncle Ted Kennedy's presidential campaign, I saw artists such as Warhol and Rauschenberg donate works to the campaign," he says. "I realized then that art is a big business." His timing may seem off—doesn't he know that in hard times the first things that rich people cut back on are art and arugula? A few art fairs, in London and Los Angeles, have been canceled in the past year. But Bobby's boy doesn't scare easily. "We've lived through downturns before, and we'll get through this one," he says. "Fairs are the new retail."

Fairs have been around for years, but they've only recently become the tail that wags the art-world dog. Some galleries do 50 percent to 70 percent of their business at fairs, or with wealthy customers they meet there. Ever since Art Basel took its Swiss franchise to Miami in 2000, fairs have become party central for the jet-set crowd—the Prada-suited dealers, shaved-headed curators, bejeweled collectors. Dealers have to apply to a jury to get in—some prestigious galleries didn't make the cut this year in Chicago—and big-time collectors

strolling for the newest bauble-on-paper expect a little pampering. To cater to their tastes, Kennedy has given the 12th floor of the Mart a high-end makeover: textured-concrete floors, state-of-the-art lighting, tasteful carpets, all spread over 130,000 square feet of exhibition space. "You don't feel like you're at a trade fair," he says. "You feel like you're in a place where 180 galleries live next door to each other." And how much did this cost him? "Millions."

Kennedy is something of an accidental art pooh-bah. Art Chicago almost collapsed in 2006—as in, the floors at the outside venue buckled just two days before the fair was set to open. With crates of paintings piling up at O'Hare, the city's cultural establishment ran to Kennedy. "I asked the gallerists who their clients were, and the names that came up were always the biggest donors to the Democratic Party in the city," he says. "I knew then that I could ask them to help us out." Some folks in Chicago still aren't sure if Kennedy's fair—*Step right this way to pick out your new Picasso, ma'am*—will benefit the local art scene. "Art Chicago has a shiny gloss, but there's a disconnect with the real art world here," says local critic Jeff Huebner, though he adds that Kennedy is growing into the job. "I've seen Chris around in the galleries lately—a lot more than I have our museum curators." Which just goes to show: never bet against the old Kennedy magic. ■

**YOU'VE GOTTA HAVE ART:** Kennedy at the Richard Gray Gallery in Chicago