

Bonita Springs National Art Festivals

The Art
Festival
Newsletter

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Festival Focus

"...the Bonita Springs Shows regularly outshine nearly all the region's festivals."

One Plus One Equals...

We are taught that the proper end to that phrase is: two.

But we also hear that the sum can be greater than total of the parts. So which is correct?

In the case of the Bonita Springs National Art Festival, the answer is both. Improbable as it may seem, Bonita Springs National consists of two shows held two months apart in the same venue in the same Southwest Florida town and, while some artists participate only in one edition of the festival or the other, many artists find that exhibiting in both shows every year yields excellent sales—more than twice what most combinations of two single festivals bring.

The festival is held on the grounds of a small upscale shopping center which, like many of its kind, has seen tenancy by stores and restaurants tumble during the Great Recession. The show is owned by the Bonita Springs Art Association. But the territory really belongs to acclaimed festival director Barry Witt.

Witt is an exemplar of the phrase, Keep It Simple. No artists' parties (morning joe is available, provided by a restaurant). No Friday night soirees. A simple, one-page artist welcome package, plus a dashboard card for artists' vehicles. And that's it! He assumes that artists are intelligent, practical and cooperative. He

is almost always correct; setup and teardown move quickly, quietly and with little intervention by Witt or his staff.

You apply, are accepted, drive to the site, set up on Friday, exhibit for reasonable hours on Saturday and Sunday. Your booth space is neither lavish nor too small. Good foot traffic patterns greet attendees, no tricky hidden spaces or dead ends.

Those are the fundamentals. There is more. Bonita Springs is part of the Southwest Florida explosion that gives credence to the song lyric, "they paved paradise and put up a parking lot (from the song Big Yellow Taxi, sung beautifully by Joni Mitchell, for those who wish to know). Just north of Naples, the Bonita shows, which were founded in 2000 (January) and 2002 (March), are part of the Great Dilution: many too many shows in much too small a geography. It is possible, according to a photographer who lives in Naples, to participate in a festival every weekend for twenty-six straight weeks during the fall to spring snowbird season.

Yet the Bonita Springs shows regularly outshine nearly all the region's festivals.

The reason is subtle, yet easy to understand: the festivals support and are deeply supported by the Bonita Springs populace. The festivals

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One Plus One Equals...

request a \$5 donation from showgoers; it is more like a mandatory admission fee, since what seems like an army of ticket-sellers staff the shows' three entry points. The gate receipts go directly to the Bonita Springs Art Association, which holds classes, mounts exhibitions and has its own dedicated building with excellent facilities and a full-time director and staff. While the number is not published, an estimate of somewhat above \$100,000 per year in funds generated for the art association at the festivals would not be out of hand.

In return, the residents in and around Bonita Springs, many living in multi-million dollar homes overlooking the waterfront, support the festival, buying art repeatedly, providing the impetus for top-level professional artists to exhibit.

The shows are laid out in the same way in both January and March. Artists who return from the previous year can request, and usually be assigned, the same space. This, too, generates repeat visits from former buyers. Patrons trend toward an older demographic, but a wealthy one as well. Both shows have become part of the area's social and cultural scene; many snowbirds arrange their time in their Bonita homes to make certain they can visit one or both shows. While the group of people in town may change from January to March, an overlap also exists, and booth visitors often choose what they wish to acquire in January, but wait until March to

make their purchases—or call the artist to make the purchase long distance from their northern homes.

Sales numbers at the Bonita shows rank near the top of national lists nearly every year, with the January show usually higher; the timing falls in the very core of when northerners want to warm their bones in the sun.

The Bonita shows have something of an unusual rhythm of patron traffic: very busy mornings, then a dead zone at lunchtime, followed by a flurry until about 3 p.m., ending in aisles so empty that artists are tempted to take long naps. Since morning buying seems to be heavy, patrons may come early for the best variety of available art. Hot weather tends to keep attendance down, although if Saturday is overly warm, Sunday will be extremely busy.

Ultimately, Bonita's success is all about the loyalty: first, by the local population to the festivals; second by top artists to well-run, well-attended, well-managed shows.

With the money and time to purchase art wherever they wish, and literally dozens of festivals to do it at during high season, Bonita Springs National patrons see Barry Witt's two shows as their own—and need look no further to acquire the art they desire. In the process, they often rewrite for many artists the basic arithmetic that says one plus one equals two.

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