



Our intrepid buyers finally settled on Greg Fuller's etching of a power station (left) for £100. Safe as Houses (above) a photo-collage by Carina Traberg, was also on offer at the Buy Art Fair in Manchester

proper. Now this does look like a trade fair, with booths for over 60 northern galleries selling everything from pop art to papier-mâché. Almost immediately our brief becomes blurred: we accept that a Mark Demstader nude fits neither our space nor our pursestrings, but Laura Richardson's *Poppies* and Alex Dipple's *Dots and Full Stops* – at the same size and at least twice our budget – go on to the maybe list.

Our musical tastes also distract us as we spot a silkscreen by Radiohead album artist Stanley Donwood – *Baghdad*. It's £420, which I'm sure is appropriate, but it doesn't fit our brief so we reluctantly walk away. Our heads are already spinning so it's helpful to stop and chat to Alex Reuben, who has stuck firmly to work that excites him personally – like Carina Traberg's imagined photo-collage landscapes – for his new gallery Contemporary Six.

Time's ticking on though so we have to become more focused: there's simply too much art here to consider each piece in detail. We vow to act less like tourists and more like the serious, hard-nosed buyers we now are, and things are going well till we hit Lancashire's See Gallery. Specialising in the late Ray Lowry, the Salford-born artist and illustrator who designed The Clash's iconic *London Calling* cover, the stand is captivating on all kinds of levels, not least that it includes the last available painting from Lowry's 1972 series of Manchester cityscapes.

The nostalgia queen in me is immediately drawn to the once-familiar orange and white corporation bus, as it glides down what seems to be Deansgate under a fluffy blue sky. Soft and impressionistic, the painting's a million miles from what Lowry is known for; but it's beautiful and it's calling to me and I want it. Okay, it's £1,500 (a pretty fair price according to some hurried iPhone research), but I want it.

We're at the fair's half-way point and, perusing Hirsts, Vic Reeves and Banksys on the other side of the hall, the Ray Lowry starts to seem quite reasonable. We consider making an offer, mainly based on my other half's projected winnings at online poker – no, of course we're not getting carried away.



The brief and our perspective are becoming skewed so we decide to sit down and take stock. With 10 minutes until closing time three pieces remain in the frame: the Lowry, a poignant photograph of a deserted Llandudno shelter, and the very first thing we spotted – a small engraving of a brooding power station. We both know the Lowry is just a pipe dream, and our audacious offer to its owner is cheerfully rejected, and much as I'm drawn to the photo I know it isn't what we've come for.

Greg Fuller's etching, though, seems too good to be true. Tucked away on the Manchester Academy of Fine Arts stand, it's the first impression from a series of just 10, and has exactly the kind of intricacy and atmosphere we're looking for. At 11 x 13 inches framed, the size is perfect, and the price tag: £100. Crossing everything we head back to the stand, and the relief we feel that it's still there tells us all we need to know.

Now in pride of place on our landing, we're thrilled to have found our first piece of real art in just half a day. The concentrated, informal environment of the Buy Art Fair must take much of the credit, though, giving us the confidence to chat to gallery owners, scan their wares and ultimately follow our instincts. We may have bought one of the cheapest pieces on show but, for the price of a couple of meals out, it feels like a real discovery; and a much more personal choice than Shop Tate or Habitat could ever offer.

And so begin the next 19 years, and what might be the most dangerous art phase yet... ▣