

ART REVIEW

Free-for-All Spirit Breezes Into a Vast Art Fair

By Roberta Smith

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Art fairs are for art lovers. There's really no way around it. You can say that they demean art, that they're all about commerce. You can complain about the crowds, the bad food, the poor ventilation. I hear you.

And yet if art is something you must have or think you want to have in your life, you stand to gain from perusing one or more of the several art fairs that have set down stakes across Manhattan this weekend. Open yourself to the best in them and they become pools of information that can humble, broaden and energize you in significant ways.

Art fairs occur because hundreds of art dealers have decided that these temporary confabs help them raise their profiles and make it easier to find one buyer each for a certain number of artworks. While the dealers seek those individual matches of art and buyer, the rest of us are free, in a sense, to watch: to absorb the art and learn from it, which is another kind of possession.

Which brings us to this year's bracing Armory Show, with booths outfitted by more than 270 galleries and private dealers spread between two piers jutting into the Hudson. It is a behemoth of a fair, the biggest by far of the weekend's offerings.

Recent Armory buzz has not been good. Despite its size, or maybe because of, the Armory Show has been hemorrhaging important dealers for several seasons. It now has competition from the hip, new Independent art fair in Chelsea and the resurgent Art Show at the Park Avenue Armory uptown. And there's also the increasingly impressive list of dealers here and abroad who simply abstain from all New York fairs. (Others include Volta, Scope, Pulse, Pool, Verge Art Brooklyn, Red Dot, Fountain and this year's newbie, the Dependent.)

All things considered, I had expected to find a dying art fair at river's edge. Instead, the show seems fresher than it has in several years. It has clearly been more revived than diminished by the loss of big-name, blue-chip or white-hot galleries, and has a younger, more egalitarian, free-for-all spirit. Lack of familiarity helps. New York dealers are sparsely represented in the show's contemporary section, and there is a host of first-timers, including 18 galleries from Latin America in this year's Focus section. An unexpected benefit: the vigorous call and response between the contemporary section, on Pier 94, and the modern section created two years ago, on Pier 92, for dealers in more historical material.

The contemporary section has few knock-down-drag-out installations or chest-beating statements. Among the more prominent sights near the entrance, at the booth of Victoria Miro, is a big bright flower sculpture by Yayoi Kusama, the 81-year-old Japanese artist and veteran of Happenings, proceeding as if neither Jeff Koons nor Takashi Murakami ever existed. At White Cube, Damián Ortega contributes "Ulysses Way," a towering assemblage sculpture of a bicycle with a household's worth of objects and appliances tied above its back fender. The German painter Katharina Grosse has wedged an enormous lyrical abstraction, which seems literally hacked from a wall, into the booth of Galerie Nächst St. Stephan Rosemarie Schwarzwälder from Vienna.

Toward the center of the pier, Iván Navarro has fenced off a large chunk of empty space with a tall, white neon imitation of wrought iron, courtesy of the Paul Kasmin Gallery, which has set up shop on a nearby bench instead of a booth. And beyond, Sam Van Aken has filled the Ronald Feldman booth with a startling number of young trees, each grafted with several varieties of stone fruits and currently in bloom, part of his "Tree of 40 Fruits" project.

One of the quieter departures from the norm has been orchestrated by Ben Kaufmann, a young Berlin dealer who is presenting a slide show of exhibitions by the 15 artists he represents. Mr. Kaufmann is further working against the dominant model at the Independent, where he is presenting a more conventional display of works by one artist.

Solo shows tend, with some exceptions, to be the high points of a fair, but they are also risky as business ventures, so their frequency and strength here can be taken as a sign of optimism. The Galerie Parisa Kind from Frankfurt is making its Armory debut with small, winsome figurative paintings and drawings by Isabelle Fein. Khastoo, a newcomer gallery from Los Angeles, has a wonderful show of gemlike abstract paintings by Zach Harris, who extends his suggestive motifs into fancifully carved and painted frames.

At Simon Lee, Toby Ziegler is showing luminous pastel updates of selected Bruegel paintings. Stuart Shave/Modern Art has dedicated its space to the visually punchy, mildly ironic modernist abstractions of Ansel Krut, an artist in his early 50s who has never had a solo show in New York.

At Kavi Gupta from Chicago is the latest from Theaster Gates, a latter-day Conceptualist who contributed a collaborative-performance-installation work to the last Whitney Biennial, while the booth of Greengrassi, a London gallery, has been lined with a whirlwind of embossed and gold-patterned paper by Pae White.

But there are also wonderful group selections, one of the most alluring being that of Canada, the stalwart of the Lower East Side, where paintings by Michael Williams, Xylor Jane, Carrie Moyer, Katherine Bernhardt and others establish a rewarding pictorial dialogue with the floor, which is thick with Moroccan rugs (also for sale). At Kerlin disparate paintings by Norbert Schwontkowski, Callum Innes and Mark Francis are elegantly rallied by the oddly appealing sculptures of Isabel Nolan, whose spiraling linear forms elaborate on and domesticate a familiar modernist motif by being carefully stitched in silk. Historical consciousness is blunter at Praz-Delavallade, where Nathan Mabry is showing large terra-cotta heads redolent of Pre-Columbian culture on aluminum pedestals that knock off Donald Judd wall sculptures.

At the booth shared by Franco Noero and Esther Schipper the conversation among works by Lara Favaretto, Henrik Olesen and Gabriel Kuri is fittingly tuned to recycled materials, including paper, the Minimalist cube and money. (Mr. Kuri designed all the Armory's printed matter and its official canvas bag.)

The distinction at the Armory Show between contemporary and modern or "New Work by Living Artists" and "Historically Significant Work of the 20th and 21st Centuries" is even more porous than these phrases from the Armory brochure attest.

Also on Pier 92 the Jonathan O'Hara Gallery has a fabulous display of transfer drawings by Robert Rauschenberg, while downstairs on Pier 94 the adjoining piers, on different levels, are connected by stairs I-20 has two striking paintings by Sylvia Sleigh (1916-2010), including a little-known portrait from 1955. Upstairs, Frey Norris is giving its all for Wolfgang Paalen (1905-59), the Surrealist-Abstract Expressionist; downstairs, Galerie Crone has a show of hard-edge abstractions from the 1960s by the little-known German artist Georg Karl Pfahler (1926 -2002).

Downstairs too, among the latest efforts of Mindy Shapero, Scott Myles and Jannis Varelas at the Breeder, from Athens, is a small obstreperous collage (paint-soaked cloth on newsprint) from 1966-67 by Vlassis Caniaris, a Greek Arte Povera artist (born in 1928) who deserves a higher American profile. (You can also find two early Caniaris sculptures nearby at Giti Nourbakhsch.)

But upstairs, where the balance tips decisively toward New York dealers quite a few of whom work privately overlooked artists and underexposed material definitely dominate. Keep an eye out for the early works of André Masson at Die Galerie and its neighbor, Oriol; the uncharacteristically sinuous Léger-like abstraction from 1939 by

Charles Biederman at Meredith Ward; the clutch of juicy interiors by Robert de Niro Sr. at D C Moore; Dan Christensen's jubilant abstractions at Spanierman Modern and the face-off among hard-edge, Op and Color Field abstraction at D. Wigmore.

Perhaps unexpectedly, the modern wing of the Armory Show can sometimes seem as fresh and mind expanding as its contemporary counterpart. Together they seem to say: Beware of your assumptions, historical and otherwise. The present is wild and messy, and the past is not exactly neat.

The Armory Show runs through Sunday at Piers 92 and 94, at 12th Avenue at West 55th Street, Manhattan; (212) 645-6440, thearmoryshow.com.

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