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The Armory Show: Playing It Safe During an Unsettled Time

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Last year the Armory Show weathered a crisis when Pier 92 over the Hudson River was condemned shortly before the art fair opened, precipitating a last-minute reshuffling of booths and the shutting down of a satellite display. This year, the fair has settled on Pier 90 and Pier 94 (dress for the outdoor walk between them) and the catastrophe is the coronavirus, which had already forced the cancellation of Art Basel Hong Kong last month. Though the Armory Show has opened smoothly, hand sanitizer stations are everywhere and elbow-bumping has replaced handshaking and air-kissing as the greeting du jour.

But what about the fair itself?

It's a solid one — if on the safe side — with lots of painting rather than complicated installations or technology. Fairs are not merely commercial ventures. Sections here that have been organized by curators affiliated with prestigious museums (like Anne Ellegood and Jamillah James, both of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles) demonstrate the increasingly porous divide between profit and nonprofit.

Given the election season and the state of the world, the Armory Show has a sizable amount of activist art. Will these artistic gestures have an effect on policy? Who knows. Like many counterintuitive aspects of our moment, maybe the next revolution will kick off inside an art fair. Here are some themes and strains (pun cautiously intended) that caught my attention.

Art Tour of the African Continent

The fair includes plenty of art closely associated with the African continent. Start with the presentation at the Paris gallery Magnin-A (Booth 614, Pier 94), since it has historic photographs by Malian artists like Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé, as well as the Benin-born Romuald Hazoumè's sly wall sculptures that remake African masks with plastic jugs and containers. The Senegalese artist Omar Ba has a fabulously collaged painting with evocative figures at Galerie Templon (Booth 604, Pier 94), while the Ethiopian artist Merikokeb Berhanu at Addis Fine Art (Booth P13, Pier 94) is presenting moody, mostly-abstract canvases.

Phoebe Boswell's drawings at Sapar Contemporary (Booth F6, Pier 90) are called "Future Ancestors" and feature deep sea fishermen from Zanzibar. The Nigerian-born Marcia Kure's photo-collages at Officine dell'Immagine (Booth F23, Pier 90) juxtapose images from fashion magazines with African masks. The sculptures of Moffat Takadiwa from Zimbabwe at Nicodim (Booth 511, Pier 94) follow a now tried-and-true tactic (think El Anatsui, from Ghana) of stringing together

fragments of refuse, from bottle caps to computer keyboard keys to create lush, tapestry-like sculptures. The British-Nigerian Niyi Olagunju at Tafeta (Booth P6, Pier 94) is the most hard-hitting, creating partially gilded remakes of traditional sub-Saharan sculptures to criticize the global trade in objects that often had sacred or ritual origins in Africa.

Politically Minded Displays

My first glance at the fair was on Super Tuesday, so I was in a mind to contemplate art's relationship to power and electoral politics. A fine older art work in this vein is Edward and Nancy Kienholz's "The Caddy Court" (1986-87), consisting of a 1978 Cadillac that has been sutured to a 1966 Dodge van and filled with animal skulls, antlers and other curios. This deliciously unsubtle commentary on justice and American history was brought into the fair by Ms. Ellegood, who organized the section of the fair called Platform. It is presented by L.A. Louver mid-Pier 94. Ms. James organized the fair's Focus section, which includes Umar Rashid's tough and uncompromising display at New Image Art (Booth F19, Pier 90). The paintings, drawings and sculptures of that artist (also known as Frohawk Two Feathers) consider the violent history of colonialism and pulls no punches: One work has text that reads, "Colonialism Is State Sponsored Terror."

June Edmonds's dark, seemingly abstract paintings at Luis De Jesus Los Angeles (Booth 827, Pier 94) are actually based on flags and their palettes are derived from a spectrum of black and brown skin complexions. Whitfield Lovell's hand-drawn images of African-American men and women (based on photographs taken between the 1860s and 1960s — the era between the Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil Rights Movement — at DC Moore (Booth 515, Pier 94) are paired with found objects that reference personal memories. Viktor Popović's photographic display at C24 Gallery (Booth F21, Pier 90) combines old postcard images of the Croatian coast, when it was a popular leisure spot, with new photographs of these same sites in postwar decrepitude — a simple but effective visual essay on the lasting effects of war.

Art of the Performance

Performance, which has made its way into museums (think of the terrific Judson Dance Theater exhibition at MoMA), is present at art fairs too. Photographs of Cassils performing in the dark with a giant block of clay (captured using strobe photography) are at Ronald Feldman (Booth 818, Pier 94), and Trulee Hall's videos, presented by Maccarone West (Platform, West End, Pier 94), feature performers in otherworldly colorful settings.

Live action includes the Ukrainian artist Zhanna Kadyrova selling her work by weight (oysters made of concrete and champagne bottles carved in granite) at Voloshyn (Booth P3, Pier 94). The artists Mella Jaarsma and Jompet Kuswidananto will activate an installation at Baik + Khneysser (Booth 27, Pier 94) that includes photographs and figurative works, with performers occupying the sculptural costumes. Perhaps most intriguing is the pet medium brought in by Adrian Wong at Carrie Secrist (Booth F31, Pier 90) who can discern, from looking at photographs of your animal companion, something about their past lives. (The booth is filled with paintings and lenticular images of Mr. Wong's late rabbit in various incarnations.)

Murals and Large-Scale Works

Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson — at ACA (Booth 305, Pier 90) — uses her folksy collage-style aesthetic to detail a visit to New York. (The mural takes over one of the booth's walls.) Summer Wheat (Platform 7, presented by Shulamit Nazarian on Pier 90) is showing "Sand Castles" (2020), a 16-foot-long painting filled with women inspired by different artistic traditions, including from ancient Egypt and Rome. Jana Vander Lee's beautifully spare weavings at Inman Gallery from Houston (Booth 306, Pier 90) are from the 1970s and '80s, and reflect the influence of geometric minimalism. Hanne Darboven's frieze-like work on paper at Galerie Crone (Booth 516, Pier 94) from 1973 is also minimalist in appearance, but is based on information theory and early artificial intelligence.

Color-Rich Painting

The Armory Show is long in painting, with a range of approaches. The wickedly acerbic canvases of Christine Wang (Platform 6, presented by Night Gallery, Pier 90) originated in internet memes. Robert Nava's monster paintings at Sorry We're Closed (Booth F13, Pier 90) have a studied, primal energy, drawn from graffiti but completed with both aerosol and oil paint. Austin Lee's paintings at Jeffrey Deitch (Booth 819, Pier 94) fuse graffiti with digital ideas and an electric candy-colored palette to create a sense of energy and psychic unrest.

Amir H. Fallah at Denny Dimin (Booth F1, Pier 90) presents dense, richly-hued paintings that refer to personal and racial histories. Georgina Gratrix at the South African gallery SMAC (Booth F32, Pier 90) works in a grotesque-expressionist vein reminiscent of Dana Schutz, while Eric Firestone (Booth 909, Pier 94) has a wonderful roundup of older contemporary paintings like Joe Overstreet's "HooDoo Mandala" (1970), a canvas stretched like a tarp on the wall. **Finally, the Viennese artist Philip Mueller at Carbon 12 (Booth P24, Pier 94) is showing 60 paintings of characters at a fictional Mediterranean island resort — wildly tattooed and occasionally defaced. A perfectly off-kilter and dystopian roundup of beautiful rogues and misfortunates, it successfully characterizes our own unsettled time, inside the bubble of an art fair.**