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Armory Show 2017: are site specific works the remedy against art fairs' monotony?

By Paul Laster



Douglas Coupland, *Lego*, 120 × 48 × 48 in (304.8 × 121.9 × 121.9 cm), 2014, Daniel Faria Gallery.

The Armory Show returned to New York this past week with a new director, a new design and renewed sense of purpose. Spread across two enormous piers on the Hudson River, the latest edition of the art fair, which was founded in 1994 by a small group of art dealers, featured 210 international galleries from 5 continents and 30 countries.

The new floor plan, designed by Brooklyn architectural firm Bade Stageberg Cox featured wider aisles and larger booths for the five distinct exhibitor sections—Galleries, Insights, Presents, Focus and Platform—that smartly integrated modern and contemporary art across the two piers. By locating the VIP Lounge at the end of Pier 92, the designers gave the show a more navigable grid, while the addition of a “town square” on Pier 94 broke up the boredom of endless booths and provided visitors a welcomed spot for contemplation and repose.

“I wanted to strip everything away and start again,” The Armory Show director Benjamin Genocchio—the former Editor-in-Chief of Artnet News, Art & Auction and Artinfo.com—told the press at the preview, “and put a town square, a kind of sacred heart, in the middle of

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the fair, and put an artwork there. I wrote to Yayoi Kusama and asked her to create a work for it and she basically sketched something on a napkin, sent it back and we said, 'great.'" Kusama's Guidepost to the New World, presented in the Platform part of the fair, offered eleven candy-red, polka-dot sculptures, which resembled giant mushrooms from a fairy tale setting, displayed on an artificial green lawn. Equally powerful—and twice as shocking—was a massive, multi-paneled painting of naked young girls, by Japanese bad-boy artist Aida Makoto. Straight out of Otaku culture (a cult populated by obsessive fans of anime and manga), the mural-like canvas captures teenage sirens in a pixelated field of butterflies, sea creatures and the ominous crosshairs of video games.

Kusama's installation was a key piece in the Platform section, which was curated by Eric Shiner—formerly the Director of The Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh and currently a Senior Vice President of Contemporary Art at Sotheby's—but there were plenty of other noteworthy projects displayed throughout the show. Jun Kaneko's massive, striped Mirage painting on the outer wall of the VIP Lounge and Douglas Coupland's Towers, a scaled down urban landscape that was completely constructed from Legos, colorfully caught our eye, while Fiete Stolte's interactive photo-booth project captured participants' silhouette reflected in the pupil of their eye for a passport-sized photo, which could be purchased on site.

"We set about breaking up the monotony found at fairs by installing site-specific and large-scale works at various points of the show," Shiner shared with Conceptual Fine Arts at the opening. "It was simply a matter of figuring out what piece would look best where and what impact we wanted to make at different points of the fair. I always imagined the Jun Kaneko painting leading into the lounge and also purposely put Abigail DeVille's Sarcophagus Blue, an old boat loaded with mannequin legs sporting torn tights—which she assembled onsite—front and center at the entrance to Pier 92 for maximum effect. Kusama's installation was the most monumental work and took the longest to organize, as it was conceived and fabricated especially for the fair."

Jeffrey Deitch—participating in his first art fair since reopening his innovative gallery—was strategically situated directly on Pier 94's dynamic town square. Presenting "The Florine Stettheimer Collapsed Time Salon," which references Deitch's initial art fair exhibition in the Gramercy International Art Fair (The Armory Show's precursor) from 22 years ago, as well as the idiosyncratic American modernist artist Florine Stettheimer, who will have a survey show at the Jewish Museum in May.

With the entrance draped by cellophane curtains and the interior set with period furniture, the pink walls of Deitch's booth displayed an important, centrally placed painting by Stettheimer, surrounded by a lively selection of paintings, drawings and sculptures by such celebrated contemporary artists as Elizabeth Peyton, Philip Taaffe, Karen Kilimnik and McDermott & McGough, along with newbies like Grace Weaver and Chloe Wise, a sensational selfie-painter with 55,000 Instagram fans.

Other highlights at Pier 94 included Mel Bochner's large-scale monoprints of hard-hitting words that expose the politics of language at Two Palms; Mike & Doug Starn's new paintings on old LP album covers and a giant glass work that riffs on one they recently created for the American embassy in Moscow, at Wetterling Gallery; Nobuaki Takekawa's glass space rocket and mannequins turned drag-queen astronauts at Ota Fine Arts; and Shinique Smith's graffiti-inspired, energetic collage paintings and bale-like sculptures made from dyed and tied together clothes at David Castillo Gallery.

Over at Pier 92, the Armory mixed modern and contemporary art to entertaining ends. Kayne Griffin Corcoran exhibited large-scale, geometric abstractions by Mary Corse that beautifully use a white, monochromatic palette and two radiant light works by James Turrell that were seamlessly embedded into the walls of the booth. Levi van Veluw's exhibition at

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Galerie Ron Mandos, featuring design-inspired charcoal drawings and wooden wall-works, also had an immersive element in the form of a cube-like structure that visitors entered to meditate in a monochromatic, gridded environment displaying raw bits of mined coal.

Deeper into Pier 92, Richard Taittinger Gallery presented an exhibition dedicated to the early years of the legendary Leo Castelli Gallery and in particular to the pioneering abstract painter and sculptor Nassos Daphnis, who had a phenomenal 17 solos shows with Castelli. The display featured works by John Chamberlain, Robert Rauschenberg and Salvatore Scarpitta, as well as a compelling selection of minimal, hard-edged abstractions by Daphnis. A few additional paintings by the artist were on view in the VIP Lounge.

Nearby, the fair's Focus section—curated by Jarrett Gregory, a former curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Whitney Museum of Art and New Museum—offered an assortment of solo shows by 12 artists from 10 countries. The exhibition, titled *What Is To Be Done?*, was introduced by the first two booths, with Johan Grimonprez's film *Blue Orchids*, which examines the covert activities of the global arms trade, at Sean Kelly and Mathilde Rosier's *Loose Alphabet*, a 7-minute video that captures costumed dancers in Kenya performing in the desert. Ironically, the video is projected upside down—as though Africa is literally on the other side of the world.

"The Focus section has always been defined by geography, such as African art last year and Middle Eastern galleries in 2015, but I don't think artists really identify with regional profiles," Jarrett Gregory told us during the preview. "I actually wanted to go the opposite way by making something very international and work with some artists to explore the idea of global connectedness through shared policies. It ended up being a somewhat political section, but it's less overt and more subtle and nuanced."

Rounding out our favorites from Focus, Rhona Hoffman Gallery presented Deana Lawson's big color photographs of people who are part of the African diaspora; Lévy Gorvy and Thomas Erben Gallery teamed up to show poetic pieces in a variety of media, including surreal sculptures made from stretched nylon stockings filled with sand, by Senga Nengudi; and Teresa Margolles examined the economy of death in Hispanic communities through sculptures and photographs, including a black-and-white image of a transgendered sex worker that the artist documented just five months before she was brutally murdered, on view at Galerie Peter Kilchmann .

The Focus section had a more open floor plan, which created a community of galleries—one where works could be observed side-by-side and ideas could be considered in dialogue with one another. As a model for display, it was quite stimulating, and one that we hope to see the new Armory Show team explore more vigorously in years to come.