



# CRITIC'S VIEW: Viewer Engagement a Priority at VOLTA NY

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by Gabrielle Selz

This year, the solo-project art fair, VOLTA, has returned to trendy Soho, the neighborhood that in the 1980s was the apex of the art scene. In spacious booths covering two floors, more than 90 galleries from five continents have mounted exhibitions of their most exciting talent for VOLTA NY.

The resulting fair—both focused and innovative—engages in the past, when the world of the art fair was a manageable size and not the behemoth that the Armory has become. It also hints towards the future, where large, shiny and chaotic works are not necessarily better, or even that interesting.

This is not to say that VOLTA is the fair where small is beautiful; rather it is the fair where the deep engagement of the viewer is once again valued as significant.

At Jonathan Ferrara Gallery, artist Adam Mysock, a self-described science nerd, revisits old masters—from the Baroque genius of chiaroscuro, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, to the 19th century French artist Jean-Léon Gérôme—in the form of the life story of an archetypal 1950s robot (who resembles the Tin Man from “The Wizard of Oz”).

In this suite of narrative paintings, done in what Mysock calls a devotional technique (he uses tiny 2.0 brushes and an egg tempera layering of more than 400 strokes per square inch), the artist visualizes the correlation between memory, artifact and progress.



“Upon Meeting the Permanently Discontent” by Adam Mysock, 2014. Acrylic on panel, 7 1/2 x 6 inches. Gallery: Jonathan Ferrara, New Orleans. Photo by Kathy Zeiger.

A few booths down, Ross Watts’s installation, *Fountain Stairs*, at Sara Nightingale pays tribute to books by alternately: layering text in his elegant cursive script; gluing pages and then sanding and beveling them until they resemble smooth, marbled stones; and entombing books in cubes of plaster as totem-like sacrificial objects.

As in relics found at an archeology site, a sense of obsolescence and reverence permeates Watts’s meticulous installation. Surface and material have been coated and abraded, melded and enshrined

to the point where they are indistinguishable from one another.



Installation of works by Ross Watts. Gallery: Sara Nightingale Gallery, Water Mill, NY. Photo by Kathy Zeiger.

At the Washington, D.C., gallery, Connersmith, performance artist Wilmer Wilson IV painstakingly tied hundreds of brown paper bags to his naked body to create a second skin. In *From My Paper Bag Colored Heart*, Wilson covered his elegant form with a fragile epidermis that engaged his viewers with skin-color politics by appropriating the “brown paper bag test.”

Throughout his performance, Wilson maintained an eerily passive expression, a technique that allowed viewers to project their own emotions onto *his* surface. Covered from toe to head, Wilson then ceremoniously liberated himself by destroying the bags with blows from his fists. The action echoed the culture of both the art of macho expressionism and the violence of racial history.

Wilson does not consider his art redemptive, but he does transform the resulting detritus of paper flesh into a gracefully abstract sculpture that resemble billowing storm clouds.



“From My Paper Bag Colored Heart” by Wilmer Wilson IV, 2014. A durational performance and “living sculpture.” Gallery: Connersmith, Washington DC. Photo by Kathy Zeiger.



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The material universe, its fragility, harmony and beauty, is the subject of Katja Loher’s work at the C24 Gallery booth. Incorporating video, performance, nature, music, dance and text, Loher compresses mediums into hand-blown glass bubbles, vases, and dinner plates. These delicately crafted structures serves as windows into idealized, artificial worlds.

Transparent yet unreachable, Loher’s lens alternately magnifies, distorts and diminishes. She says she is interested in freeing video from the projector and screen, allowing the viewer to enjoy the beauty of the object. Indeed, her elaborate form of synthesis results in a mesmerizing kaleidoscope of imagery, from beehives to Busby Berkeley dancers. These works are grand-scale productions in miniature, the cosmos captured on the head of a pin.



“To Whom Does The Air Belong To?” by Katja Loher, 2014. Two-Channel video composition, 9:45 minutes, looped. Hand-Blown Glass Bubbles with Video Screen, Embedded in White Acrylic, 14 x 14 x 10 inches. Edition 5/5 +2APS. Signed and Edited Verso. Gallery: C24, NYC. Photo by Kathy Zeiger.

Artist Christy Rupp at Frederieke Taylor Gallery is also concerned with the frailty of our natural world. In an arresting mixed-media sculpture, *Walrus*, 2014, made of used credit cards, Rupp comments on the devastation of the environment brought about by technology and overconsumption.



“Walrus” by Christy Rupp, 2014. Mixed media with credit card solicitations, 41 x 72 x 10 inches. Gallery: Frederieke Taylor Gallery, NYC. Photo by Kathy Zeiger.

A focus on contemporary landscape, both real and imaginary, is at the center of Chris Barnard’s paintings. At Luis de Jesus Los Angeles, Barnard’s large, romantic paintings are reminiscent of 19th century American landscape art, replete with sweeping vistas and dramatic light. Incorporating tightly rendered imagery with heavy viscosity and saturated colors, Barnard imbues this idealized vision of the American West with forbidding truth.

The gorgeously painted *Revenge* is a depiction the Utah desert. What looks to be an empty landscape is, in fact, anything but. This is the site of a secret test area for military drones. In the distance, Barnard has wielded his palette knife to create a sculpted surface of a landscape in regurgitation.



“The Revenge” by Chris Barnard, 2013. Oil on canvas. 42 x 60 inches. Gallery: Luis De Jesus Los Angeles. Photo by Kathy Zeiger.

A mix of technique, of controlled chaos, is at the heart of Bobby Mathieson’s paintings at the Lyons Wier Gallery booth. With this exhibition, which boldly combines figuration with abstraction, the gallery is stepping into the realm of abstract art.

Visceral, textured, expressionistic, Mathieson has created a series of portraits of historical personalities that, like his style, embrace the archetypal and the unusual. A leering Charlie Parker winks out of a painting that is at once monstrous and deeply reverent.



“The Internet (Slick)” by Charlie Parker, 2013. Oil on canvas. 20 x 16 inches. Gallery: Lyons Wier Gallery, NYC. Photo by Kathy Zeiger.

Lightening the mood, Bad at Sports, the art news and 60-minute audio interview show based in

Chicago, conducts an impromptu discussion from a giant bed in the middle of the upstairs hallway. With a wink and a nod to John Lennon and Yoko Ono, who in 1969 held a televised peace vigil from their bed for two weeks, Bad at Sports is interested in a discussion of art that is both naughty and familiar—like, well, bed.

Guests, curators, artists and critics are invited by co-founders Amanda Browder, Duncan MacKenzie, and Richard Holland up onto their bed for snuggle-fests and interviews during the four-day fair.



Bad At Sports – Art Podcast Installation. Gabrielle Selz pictured with Bad At Sports’ Amanda Browder and Richard Holland. Photo by Kathy Zeiger.

“I paint in order to see things that would not exist if I did not paint them,” artist Josh Dorman says of his work. At the Ryan Lee Gallery, he has combined a panorama of images from botany to topographical map to folk tales to visions reminiscent of Pieter Bruegel and Hieronymus Bosch. Encapsulating apocalypse and paradise, his work is about metamorphosis.

On vintage paper he combines printing, drawing, collage and paintings of epic scenes of worlds hatching, cities teetering on collapse and mythic landscapes. A coffin-like box, engraved with Dorman’s symbolic figures and folkloric creatures, contains a 14-foot-long scroll, which is in turn animated in stop-motion video on the far wall.

[“Sometimes we find a broken cup” by Josh Dorman, 2013.](#) Video by Gabrielle Selz.



“Sometimes we find a broken cup” by Josh Dorman, 2013. Stop Motion Video. Gallery: Ryan Lee. Photo by Kathy Zeiger.



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The hallmark of contemporary art is that its complexity often calls for the deep participation of the viewer, and that’s harder to accomplish in blockbuster art fairs like the Armory. The noise, the competing styles, the sheer volume of objects tend to blend into a ruckus riot that can be fun, but is

ultimately exhausting and difficult to parse. It's a relief then to step into the more confined experience of a show like VOLTA NY.

**BASIC FACTS:** VOLTA NY presents its tenth edition from March 6 - 9, 2014 at 82 Mercer, New York, NY 10012. [www.ny.voltashow.com](http://www.ny.voltashow.com).