



CRITIC VIEW: Art Southampton—Nothing to See but Art

July 10, 2015

by James Croak

Rodeo for the rich. Garage sale for the gorgeous. Tractor pull for the literati. Camp for culture. Tent city for Occupy Southampton.

If East End natives watched as acres of Range Rovers and Lexuses converged on Thursday, July 9, 2015 onto a field just off Scuttle Hole Road in Bridgehampton, it's fun to guess what they would make of it. Art Southampton, now in its fourth year, has become a sprawling lodestone of cultural observation and thought, a mandatory intellectual pause in a summer of sand and rosé, assembled this year in the grassy field surrounding Nova's Ark.

Art Southampton, a division of Art Miami, is a class act of organization. Given the massiveness of the project, they move in quietly with flawless planning and facility construction; if they were adorned in camo one could mistake them for the U.S. Army. Every detail is thought through and addressed, nothing to see here but the art.

Lawrence Fine Art of East Hampton exhibits Knox Martin, now in his ninth decade, and finds new life in the East Village cartoon art that became popular in the late 1970s. In Martin's *Capricho*, scores of figures are tossed onto a painting helter skelter, resulting in swirling construction of good colors and dancing form.

The work is vaguely derived from Francisco Goya's *Los Caprichos* series, wherein Goya believed that "human errors and vices" were fair game for painting, a radical thought in 1799. Mr. Knox has inserted one or two of Goya's characters into the painting, but other than that there is little resemblance. It is a humor filled and buoyant work that will bring life into a dull room.

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Capricho I by Knox Martin, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48

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Also in this stall are abstract expressionist works by Joe Novak who shows skill in this unfortunately tired genre of painting. This mannerism is seeing a resurgence in popularity recently, but seems to be lacking critical support in the contemporary art world.

Oddball works by artists late in their career are always troublesome for art historians: how many

passes should a stellar career get? John Chamberlain (1927 –2011), a Shelter Island resident, made a huge mark in the art world by adding scrap metal car parts to his sculpture in the 1950s. A member of the legendary Leo Castelli Gallery, by 1959 he was exhibiting completely crushed whole cars fresh from the recycling auto masher.

This fit handily into the prevailing abstract expressionism school in appearance but had a unique twist in that he started with a pop (short for popular) object. As Pop art would soon displace abstract expressionism with advertising imagery via artists Jasper Johns and Robert Rauchenberg, Chamberlain would survive the culling for a second act. He was alone in this odd method but routinely included in the major New York School painting shows; his early piece *Nutcracker* (1958) sold at auction for \$4.7 million.



“Memo to Bach” by John Chamberlain, 2005. Painted and chromed steel. 36 x 26 1/4 x 18 1/2 inches.

Chamberlain was never fond of being known as a scrap car artist and years later referred to it as “colored metal.” By that token I suppose the fading Jeff Koons doesn’t do shiny balloon dogs from kid’s birthday parties, they are really reflective amorphous amoeba-like shapes. (I can’t wait to hear the spin on that inevitable collapse.)

Because Chamberlain disdained his roots in this near-perfect Abstract Expressionist/Pop genre he invented, he wandered into areas that he should have avoided, e.g. decorative abstract sculptures lacking the punch of his seminal work. [Galerie Terminus](#) of Munich offers a late work by Chamberlain only partially recognizable as such. Also included in this booth is a watercolor by the auction star Gerhard Richter.

New York Academy of Art is the foremost graduate school of figurative art in America. Located on Franklin St. in Tribeca it was founded in 1982 by various art world figures including, improbably, Andy Warhol. At this year’s Art Southampton, art world luminary April Gornik debuts as a curator with her first project: an attractive grouping of artists who studied at this school.



NYAA booth with curated show by April Gornik at Art Southampton

A true keeper from this show is the serene and unexpected *At the Motel* by Elisabeth McBrien. It has a David Hockney like flatness, colors, and open sky, but one also sees the desert charm of

Georgia O'Keeffe embedded here. It is an involving rural moment treated fairly by an alumna of this school.



"At the Motel" by Elisabeth McBrien, 2015. Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 inches.

Mark Borghi Fine Art is showing Bernie Taupin's *BANG*, which consists of the large letters spelling the title over some unused paper shooting targets. Mr. Taupin is a market newcomer and embedded in a blue chip secondary market gallery, so it will be curious to see how he fares on the primary market. His other career as a song writer for Elton John and others brings many fans to his efforts, but crossover careers are notoriously difficult.



"BANG" by Bernie Taupin, 2010. 26.5 x 40 inches.

Peter Marcelle Project operates exhibition spaces in Manhattan and Southampton and is exhibiting one of the more high-end paintings seen at the fair, a late Robert Rauschenberg with an asking price of \$500,000. Given that the now deceased Rauschenberg's paintings have garnered eight figures at auction, this seems like a bargain price.

Artprice confirms the highest gavel sum paid for a Rauschenberg was last May at Christie's New York for his 1961 "Johanson's Painting," with bidding closed out at a stunning \$16,500,000. (Nearly the price of a Hamptons summer rental.)



Robert Rauschenberg, dated "2k 7" shown by Peter Marcelle Project

Sergott Contemporary Art Alliance (SCAA) of Rancho Santa Fe is exhibiting an effulgent work easily recognized as the work of artist Julie Harvey, with her center figure hovering over and within a background pattern. Dancer Billi Shakes is the subject, which Harvey finds rousing as the versatile entertainer "is an idealized goddess where sensuality oozes from every pore." It is a sustaining work and should sell easily.



“Billi Shakes” by Julie Harvey, 2015. Peacock oil on panel, 50 x 37 inches.

Another engaging painting shown by SCAA is by art world newcomer Emily E. Halpern. She describes her work as “abstract representation,” a term that would seem at odds with itself, but perhaps no more than instrumental music which abstract art often mimics. This style of work is entirely abstract, but typically about a physical subject so the contrast fits. She is an artist to watch.



“The Story of Our Love” by Emily E. Halpern, 2013. Oil on canvas, 42 x 42 x 2.5 inches. Exhibited at Art Southampton.



“Tight Rope Walking For People With Complicated Lives” by Emily E. Halpern, 2011. Oil on linen, 55 x 55 inches. (Not presented at Art Southampton but represented by the gallery).

There were two off-subject displays at the opening of Art Southampton: Christie’s International Real Estate, which is an unwelcome and obnoxious art-fair addition, one I hope is culled next year. And Graff Diamonds, which fit in if for no other reason than they brought along three gorgeous jewelry models who were good natured and posed for photos with fair attendees.

The Graff Diamonds security crew looked to be Secret Service level but hung back and were unobtrusive and so had no ill effects on the merriment at the booth.



Graff Diamonds model

A personal favorite at the fair was Teresa Elliott’s *Javelina Clays*, a drop-dead lush oval painting of a

figure wallowing in mud presented by Sag Harbor's RJD Fine Arts Gallery. There was nothing else in the RJD booth that could compete with this touchstone of painterly craft and, for that matter, little else among other offerings in the fair that could.



"Javelina Clays" by Teresa Elliott. Oil on linen, 37 x 37 inches.

Another popular hit was the strong lyrical paintings of Santiago Ydañez shown at Art Southampton by the Dillon Gallery.



"Untitled (Side Face)" by Santiago Ydanez. Acrylic, 78 x 78 inches.

A raucous amusement that was displayed in at least four places, by design not chance, were six-foot jailbait photographs of a 17-year-old Kate Moss originally commissioned by Esquire. The magazine featured her as part of a derogatory article about waif-like girls challenging the beauty standards of the day. Uh-huh, called that one right.

Moss poses here attired in nothing more than panties, hose, and ginormous hooker shoes, clutching a teddy bear. These photos by [Kate Garner](#) were actually the second shoot, as the magazine tossed the first set and dismissed Moss as a serious model. These should be exhibited next to the "Dewey Defeats Truman" newspaper headline photos.



Kate Moss photos

This writer would have hoped for more blue chip galleries, typical sellers to the crowd that assembled, for example a Thaddaeus Ropac or Larry Gagosian. Art Southampton should bring those galleries and similar ones into the fold, even if their presence is a loss leader of donated space. A rising tide lifts all boats.

Still, overall the fair is generally good fun and filled with interesting and accomplished art: one would be remiss to skip it.

BASIC FACTS: Art Southampton takes place from July 9 – 13, 2015 at Nova's Ark Project, 60 Millstone Road, Bridgehampton, NY 11976. www.art-southampton.com.

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