



CRITIC'S VIEW: Highs and Lows at The Armory Show's Contemporary Pier

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by James Croak

Until recently the enlarging phenomena of art fairs was nearly indistinguishable from car shows or boat shows, and often held in the same cavernous locations making the overlap more than casually apparent.

Glittery products were arranged in aisles with each vendor renting a stall and hiring a pretty girl who could sweet talk three memorized bullet points. "Sir, our 40-foot Ejactor rams the waves like a quarterback heading for the Prom Queen."

Then, a week later in the same space: "This hot painting is a seminal work of a favorite artist in the youthful Chelsea Arts District." Attendees could be forgiven for getting the two confused.

Today, The Armory Show has again taken the lead in modifying this unfortunate blueprint, just as their ancestor-in-name did in 1913, throwing off the prissy Beaux-Art hegemony by mounting a fair in a weapons depot for the 69th Regiment at 25th Street and Lexington Avenue. Hence the "Armory" of the show's title.

This latest incarnation of that edgy spirit has been underway for 22 years and expectations are high for The Armory Show's new Executive Director, Benjamin Genocchio, who has stuffed so many educational programs and events into the four days beginning March 3, 2016 that the show now rivals intensive MFA programs. With two piers, 168 exhibitors from 36 countries, dozens of public talks, videos, and commissions, it is nigh impossible for any one person to see it all, even attending every day. The organization is so seamless, one would think the 69th Regiment was still involved.

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1913 Armory show button.

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The never dull art critic [Jerry Saltz](#) will vet Benjamin Genocchio discussing criticism in the digital age. Writer Blake Gopnik and Andy Warhol Museum Director Eric Shiner are presenting a talk about the early life of Andy Warhol. These and other chats by art world insiders are held at the media lounge.

There is a program on perspectives of African art which is expected to be a sell-out event, an

ongoing symposium curated by Julia Grosse and Yvette Mutumba elucidating the burgeoning art world in Africa and the African Diaspora. Featured among talks, installations and videos are Kapwani Kiwanga, El Anatsui, Sam Nhlengethwa, and Bisi Silva.

The fair is now so large and the events so extensive it is best to plan visits in advance via the comprehensive program listings on [artsy.net](https://www.artsy.net), which has partnered with The Armory for the fourth year. Since Artsy makes a writer's life much easier, I'll give them a solid plug: don't go to any art fair without them.

The show is divided into two parts, contemporary art and modern art, each having its own pier on the Hudson river at Twelfth Avenue and 55th Street in New York City. The balance of this article is about the contemporary pier; a second article follows on the modern pier.

There is abstraction-lite in abundance throughout the contemporary pier, simple art that is being manufactured widely and putting critics into collective conniptions. "Crapstraction" and "zombie formalism" are the popular monikers for this widely appearing and callow enthusiasm, but no one has yet put a finger on why it has suddenly appeared like moss on a lawn. Possibly it is the preferred art of the nouveau-riche, whose taste has yet to develop beyond the simple shower-curtain pattern decorations found applied to canvas throughout this show. This could be ignored if this pursuit had not followed chronologically a long period of profound introspection and critical theory that generally indicated abstraction might not be so profound after all: not an elucidation, but a fabrication; ersatz depth.

That said, there is real depth to be found throughout the fair, and it is often delivered with engaging beauty.

This kind of beauty can typically be found in figuration by such artists as kindred spirit Petah Coyne, whose *Mishima's Spring Snow*, 2015 is exhibited by the long running Galerie Lelong. Coyne's often hanging constructions have quietly grown in popularity over the years, and her feminine sensibility and imagery drawn from nature come together in some of the most beautiful art being made today.



"Untitled #1410 (Mishima's Spring Snow)" by Petah Coyne, 2015. Exhibited with Galerie Lelong.

Another perennial favorite of mine exhibited by this French and American gallery is Catalan sculptor Jaume Plensa, whose work has often been installed as public sculpture. Public art has too often been an artistic backwater of uniformly bad art with commissions paid to the connected instead of the gifted. Jaume Plensa and perhaps half a dozen others are clear exceptions, the quiet mystery and airy presence of their works adding splendor to a public plaza.

In the Contemporary show, Lelong exhibits an image of a figure constructed of letters of the

alphabet, used frequently by Plensa in his commissions. This imagery fits perfectly with the manifest conclusions of 20th century philosophy, wherein an individual psyche is constructed by phonetic language. Plensa has utilized this technique in dozens of pieces and it never seems to tire.



“Sappho VI” by Jaume Plensa, 2015. Exhibited with Galerie Lelong.

Antonio Tàpies has his own foundation, Fundació Antoni Tàpies, and museum in Barcelona, reflecting his tremendous popularity on the Iberian peninsula. His dramatic work is well known in the art world but never really gained the complete attention of the literati as, say, Picasso did. He died in 2012 and pro-forma his work seems to be appearing in mainstream locations, such as the dark work exhibited here by the Antwerp based Axel Vervoordt gallery.

The piece is emblematic of the artist’s painted sculpture or perhaps constructed paintings; he is so facile in both areas they seem to blend together into a form of his own making. That facility, combined with his reoccurring use of organic materials, makes his work fit across multiple categories. This is a good art, but not such a good one for today’s art market, which prefers to have categories a tad neater. Even so, his blend of abstraction and figuration by recycling architecture and furniture still makes him a good long-term investment.



“Forma d’armari inclinada” by Antonio Tàpies, 1968. Exhibited with Axel Vervoordt Gallery.

The booth at Gallery MOMO of Cape Town, South Africa, is a show unto itself and a true thrill, work that grabbed this writer’s attention. A stand-out is hard to pull off in a fair this immense, but the gallery artist Mary Sibande is up to the task. Sibande rebranded an Aunt Jemima stereotype, showing her ruminating on (and knitting) a superhero’s cape or tunic, replete with the stock D.C. Comics logo, trailing a skein of yarn that she holds in front of her flowing uniform in an image of power reversal that is both haunting and hilarious. It is witty, engaging and deadly accurate, perfectly rendered with high production values throughout.



“They don’t make them like they used to” by Mary

Sibande, 2009. Exhibited with Gallery MOMO.

In another installation photograph portraying female strength, Siband shows a similarly adorned African woman commanding nine fierce attack dogs, each cast in flaming orange resin: the “negress” no more.



“Right Now!” by Mary Sibande, 2014. Exhibited with Gallery MOMO.

Another keeper is the engaging performance piece by Italian Romina de Novellis, presented by the Alberta Pane Gallery of Paris. Novellis sits in a cage in the buff among hundreds of carnations and then fastens them one at a time to the cage interior until her world is reduced to the beauty of flowers, and our only view of her is a nymph in the garden.

In spite of much doomsaying, art fairs are not the end all of visual art involvement. Mostly they can be faulted for not fostering the contemplative environment necessary to grasp subtle layered work: it would be like meditating on the subway. Other venues can deliver that rewarding experience much better.

The good news is that increasingly they are curated with themes and ancillary programs that do provide an exciting and educational experience, such as in this year’s The Armory Show. Missing it would be unthinkable.

James Croak is an American sculptor working in conceptual figuration and an art critic for Hamptons Art Hub. Click [here](#) to read his review of The Armory Show Modern Pier.

BASIC FACTS: The Armory Show is held March 3 – 6, 2016 at Pier 94 and Pier 92, 711 12th Avenue, New York, NY 10019. The Armory Show’s Contemporary Section is held in Pier 94 and its Modern Section held at Pier 92. Hours: Thursday – Sunday, noon to 7 p.m. Admission: \$45 or \$60 with VOLTA Admission. www.thearmoryshow.com.
