



CRITIC'S VIEW: Frieze New York Strong in Emerging Galleries and Artists

May 6, 2016

by Charles A. Riley II

Confident that art can take us places, I boarded a yellow water taxi at 35th Street and chugged slowly along the East River to Berlin, Brussels and Beijing, courtesy of [Frieze New York 2016](#).

Even a conscientious New York gallery hopper has reason to leave Chelsea and the overstuffed auction houses during peak sales season to see what the rest of the world considers significant. While some of the fare is familiar (major Twombly at Acquavella or Damien Hirst and Larry Gagosian making up), the byways of the 33 Focus and 18 Frame sections, where emerging galleries and artists are offered half-price booth space, are well worth the river voyage.

Trailing in the wake of [Chuck Close](#) and a few wide-eyed (and large walleted) major collectors as they rushed the press preview on Wednesday, May 4, 2016, I soon found installations that engaged and rewarded, including the juxtaposition of a red and black painting by [Callum Innes](#) with an *Homage to the Square* sculpture by [Jose Davila](#) at Sean Kelly. Another gorgeously painted Innes in an unforgettable range of blues was not far away at London's Frith Street Gallery.

With 15 galleries under the tent, Berlin stakes a claim for being the city of the moment. Still, one of the only European galleries to compete with the mega-booths of the Americans was the Galerie Gisela Capitan of Cologne, where a tremendous painting by [Albert Oehlen](#) and a painting and mural by [Gunther Forg](#) and Albert Oehlen commanded crowds.

Rodolphe Janssen from Brussels went all out with a spectacular plywood-paneled installation for the seductive stone and canvas *trompe-l'oeil* works of [Sam Moyer](#). This was one of the most fastidious of presentations at the fair, a triumph of materials amid materialism.



Installation by Sam Moyer. Courtesy Galerie Rodolphe Janssen & Sam Moyer.



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For elegance, the creamy white and subdued harmonies of the enigmatic sculpture of [Gabriel Rosas Aleman](#), perfectly curated in a radiantly white space by the BaleriaTracesia Cuatra of Madrid and Guadalajara, was almost too pure for visitors to cross the invisible boundary and enter the booth.

[Jo Baer](#) was in attendance at the booth of Berlin's Barbara Thumm Gallery, which was showing her stately, flowing, oil on canvas paintings of the mid 1970s. Known as a Minimalist, her hard-edged, immaculate paintings are a mainstay of many museums including New York's MoMA. But Baer's more expressive and lyrical side emerges in these important works.

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"Turning (Intro/About)" by Joe Baer, 1978. Oil on canvas, 84 1/10 x 60 inches. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin.

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"Facing" by Joe Baer, 1978-79. Oil on canvas. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin.

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Thumm was part of the Focus part of the fair, which along with the Frame galleries (which paid less for their booths) is set aside for galleries that are less established and, in the case of Focus, showing a single artist per booth. This was unquestionably the best neighborhood under the tent.

One of the highlights of Focus was the technically spectacular, entrancing group of paintings by [Israel Lund](#) presented by the Lower East Side's David Lewis gallery. I was lured from the aisle by the delicate colors and surface effects, but held by the structural depths of the work under strong light. Oddly enough, light was a problem on the overcast day of the preview. Some booths blazed under track lighting, but others in the bargain sections were underlit to the point of being tenebrous, which was unfortunate for both artists and visitors anxious to see their work.

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Painting by Israel Lund. David Lewis, New York.

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The talk of the fair, at least in some circles, is [Maurizio Cattelan](#)'s pitiable [live donkey](#) gently circling

a miserable pen under a blazing chandelier, a “tribute” to the Daniel Newburg Gallery where the same concept (not the same beast) essentially closed the gallery in 1994 because of the trouble it brought to the intrepid owner. Snapped every few seconds by the phones of fairgoers compelled to document its presence on the art scene, the donkey calmly circled clockwise.

“He’s a righty,” his trainer explained to me—the donkey has also appeared on the Metropolitan Opera Stage in “La Boheme.” What may have been fresh and edgy 22 years ago is stale today. The donkey mimicked the desultory grazing of the worn-out visitors to the circuit of booths outside as the vernissage started toward evening. I wish I had skipped it, or could have opened the tent and let the animal out onto the lawn by the riverbank.

The advantage of attending a preview extends beyond the free champagne and celebrity spotting to the opportunity to be corrected by the artist herself when the critic too quickly grasps the wrong end of the stick. I was admiring what I was sure were *paintings* by [Luisa Rabbia](#) at the estimable Peter Blum gallery when the artist was summoned to point out that the lusciously colored, sweeping canvases were *drawings*, spiraling pencil marks and delicate fingerprints floating over the veils of indigo veined with red tributaries. “The energy you put in is recorded physically in the mark of the pencil or finger,” she instructed me.



“Territories (2)” by Luisa Rabbia. Peter Blum, New York.

Even amid the souk mentality there is room for soul. At Ratio 3, a San Francisco gallery, the earnest architectural models and drawings of [Katarina Burin](#) pay tribute to her parents’ conflicting memories of their home in Yugoslavia. Buildings that have vanished in a country that “no longer exists” are captured in deliberately hazy drawings and lovingly constructed models that cleverly trill on the dual recollections of the couple: unable to determine if siding was one color or another, the artist uses both on different parts of the model.



“UNHCR, Ulica Rsanska 5 Belgrade” by Katarina Burin, 2016. MDF, acrylic, basswood, 34 3/4 x 24 1/4 x 18 1/2 inches. Courtesy of Ratio 3, San Francisco.



“Drawing for US Embassy, Terrazzo Stairs” by Katarina Burin, 2016.

Graphite and colored pencil on paper, 23 x 40 1/2 inches. Courtesy of Ratio 3, San Francisco.



“US Embassy Terrazzo Stairs, Zagreb” by Katarina Burin, 2016. MDF, Bass wood, acrylic, 14 1/2 x 24 1/2 x 16 1/2 inches. Courtesy of Ratio 3, San Francisco.

An even more powerful moment, for this viewer, was an oil crayon painting on a scrap of paper barely bigger than a postage stamp. A romantic seascape in glowing lapis lazuli with a streak of white for a lighthouse, it resembles in miniature the pastels of Redon or Vuilliard. Relegated to a back wall in the booth of Boers-Li, a Beijing gallery, it may be the smallest and hardest to locate work in the fair, but the one with the biggest heart.



“Blue Sea” by Kang Wanhua. Oil pastel on paper. Boers-Li Gallery, Beijing.

This piece was made by [Kang Wanhua](#), a political prisoner trapped in the Communist gulag during the last years of China’s Cultural Revolution. His wife had tipped the Red Guards to his subversive comments in the hope that they would warn him to shut up, but they locked him away for four years at the very end of that disastrous period (echoes of which resounded this past week when Chinese children nationwide were taught to report on counter-revolutionary behavior).

Returning several times during the preview, I found myself deeply moved by the image of him packing between the leaves of a world history volume that he was allowed to take with him when he left the camp in 1979 the drawings that had kept him sane in jail. Nothing at the fair, which was chiefly dominated by monumental-scale works, outweighed the sheer emotional power concentrated in that tiny window on an unseen sea.

BASIC FACTS: Frieze New York remains on view through May 8, 2016 at Randall’s Island Park. The art fair is open Friday, May 6, from 11 am – 8 pm; Saturday, May 7, 11 am – 7 pm; Sunday, May 8, 11 am – 6 pm. Tickets for Frieze New York 2016 start at \$10 and are limited.

Visit www.frieze.com for more information.

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