



Critic's View: Pier 90 of The Armory Show Holds Rewards for Collectors & Serious Viewers

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by Franklin Hill Perrell

It may be argued that the preponderance of new art and less familiar galleries to be found on Pier 92 and 94 of The Armory Show makes it the place to be, but for a serious view or collector there are many rewards on Pier 90. The curatorial characters produces a readily digestible totality through two main thematic divisions: contemporary art and historic modernism—each found within separately defined sections of the pier.

Right after entering, we see the galleries that present newer art, emphasizing the figure. Wit and color are evident from the outset with the brightly glazed ceramic totems of [Eric Croes](#) presented by the Brussels gallery, [Sorry We're Closed](#). Whether shaped like Olmec masks, or teapots, these stacked towers of shapes arranged like apples on a skewer, address the viewer with bulbous heads and expressive faces, at times with exaggerated ears or hollow eyes, along with mutations of animal elements.



Sculpture by Eric Croes exhibited at The Armory Show 2019 with Sorry We're Closed gallery. Photo by Franklin Hill Perrell.

Color is in a varied pastel palette with greyish hues of pink, yellow, coral, cobalt and green. A few pieces are done as lamps with rope shades. One table top sculpture shows a creature—crammed ark on legs—that would be a great centerpiece for a mid-century modern dining room.



Sculpture by Eric Croes exhibited at The Armory Show 2019 with Sorry We're Closed gallery. Photo by Franklin Hill Perrell.

Across at Rosenfeld Porcini Gallery from London, is a lively collection of paintings by the Nigerian social-comment artist Ndidie Emefiele. She paints stylish young women in Nairobi, at poolside, nail salons, places like restaurants, or resorts, lounging on sofas, or chatting together, amidst an array of food products and consumer goods. The artist uses compact disks to portray their eyes, or sunglasses. At the height of hip fashion, very upscale in attitude, they convey the material culture of contemporary life.

While serious concerns are implicit that underscore the impact of post-colonialism and globalism awash with new wealth, a satirical undertone suggests, possibly, a Nigerian version of “The Housewives of...”.



“Cuddle Cat” by Ndidie Emefiele, 2018. Acrylic, print textile, vintage clock bezel, pasted printed papers, compact disk, sketch book cut-outs, silver marker and plastic trim on canvas, 82.67 x 82.67 inches. Exhibited with Rosenfeld Porcini Gallery at The Armory Show 2019. Photo by Joanna Gmuender.

My favorite among those artists heretofore less familiar in New York was the work of [Peter Williams](#) exhibited with [Luis De Jesus Los Angeles](#). The bright prismatic color immediately draws in the viewer: pointillism right out of Seurat, done with an oil paint marker).

Amidst a variety of dense, multi-figure compositions, some of which feature a poignant narrative of racial injustice and similar abuses (despite the cheerful palette, appealing patterns, and overall upbeat attitude), the painting, *My Culture is Yer Freight*, 2019, contained imagery that ironically invoked Picasso’s *Demoiselle d’Avignon*. This especially compelling work, whose theme, surprising to me, was inspired by the idea of a shipping container, is filled with explicit figures along with African statuary or masks.

On one level, it references the idea of goods taken out of and brought into Africa, but more specifically the slave trade, and its history ultimately in the U.S., inspired by the story of the once-slave, Henry Box Brown, who in 1849 had himself shipped north (apparently mailed) to freedom by being packed in a wooden box.



“My Culture is Yer Freight” by Peter Williams 2018. Oil-based enamel, oil and pencil on canvas, 60 x 72 inches. Exhibited with Luis De Jesus Los Angeles. Photo by Franklin Hill Perrell.

The latter section at Pier 90, further away from the entrance, includes many standouts. Especially striking were booths presented by the New York galleries of Lesley Feely, Hollis Taggart and David Benrimon Fine Art along with Hackett Mill from San Francisco, Gary Nader Art Centre from Miami/Los Angeles/New York plus several less familiar Italian and German galleries.

At [Lesley Feely](#), a beautiful Feidl Dzubas along with a Helen Frankenthaler represented color field painting accompanied by stunning examples from Sam Francis and Paul Jenkins. Robert Kelly, a less familiar artist, is exemplary for his graphic strength.

[Hollis Taggart](#) had an especially informative display of artists who affiliated as teachers and students with the Art Students League. Outstanding was Richard Pousette Dart's *Opaque Horizon*, done with a heavy impasto of bright color. It was notable to see major works by artists such as Hans Hofmann, Milton Avery, and Louise Nevelson, along with less familiar examples.



"Opaque Horizon" by Richard Pousette-Dart, 1985-6. Acrylic on canvas, 22 x 28 inches. Signed verso. Exhibited with Hollis Taggart at The Armory Show 2019. Photo by Joanna Gmuender.

Among the best of these was the painting *Unities #31*, 1973, by Leon Berkowitz, which was comparable in its misty quality to the spray paintings of Olitzki, this being done in a very beautiful palette of purple and green. Also notable were the several Pop colored paintings by Knox Martin.



"Unities #31" by Leon Berkowitz, 1973. Oil on canvas, 64 x 86 inches. Photo by Joanna Gmuender.

[David Benrimon Fine Art](#) had a bold display with the graphic strength of a pungently colored Peter Halley standing up perfectly with adjacent works by Roy Lichtenstein and Tom Wesselman. Two particular gems are the signature example of a Gottlieb Blast, with its deep brown background, and a comparably striking Kusama painting.



"Time Lapse" by Peter Halley, 2014, center, flanked by art by Tom Wesselman and Roy Lichtenstein exhibited by David Benrimon Fine Art at The Armory Show.

Acrylic, fluorescent acrylic and roll-a-tex on canvas, 77 x 70 inches. Photo by Franklin Hill Perrell.

[Hackett Mill](#) has an array of Bay area artists, mostly figurative, along with some brightly hued paintings by Howard Hodgkins. It's hard to find a better sculptor than Manuel Neri and they had some great examples, with expressively painted colors rather than the artist's typical all-white.



"Caryatid II" by Manuel Neri, 2008 Cast 1/ 4. Bronze with oil-based pigment, 31.5 x 8 x 5.5 inches. Exhibited with Hackett Mills at The Armory Show 2019. Photo by Joanna Gmuender.

A pleasant surprise was the work of Raimonds Staprans who has his distinct manner of merging abstraction with recognizable elements of still life or landscape through high-keyed color and lush brushwork. At the age of 92 , the artist is gaining momentum with museum shows and similar increased visibility. Like some other Bay Area artists, he is unstinting in his rich use of elegantly textured pigments.



"An Italian Sunset Mug" by Raimonds Staprans, 2018. Oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches. Exhibited with Hackett Mill at The Armory Show 2019. Photo by Franklin Hill Perrell.

Also there was a comparative installation of a very painterly portrait by David Park and a similar work by Diebenkorn.

At [Gary Nader](#) was a strong display of three significant works by Lam and two by Matta. Among the European galleries, it was exciting to see works by Giorgio Morandi, early pieces by Lucio Fontana, and in several different galleries, works by Fausto Melotti who has been gaining notoriety of late with major museum shows in Europe and in NY at Hauser Wirth. Also notable were examples of op art by Italian and German artists from the 60s and 70s.

The theme of this more traditional section was not only to present iconic examples by major artists but also to highlight less famous artists ("neglected talent") working in comparable modes who are now re-emerging. Overall, Pier 90 is very worthwhile, and for a change, it might be fun to see it

first, with fresh eyes before becoming immersed in the stimulating frenzy of Pier 92/94.

BASIC FACTS: The Armory Show 2019 was presented March 7 to 10, 2019 at Pier 90, 92 and 94 in New York. www.thearmoryshow.com.

Franklin Hill Perrell is an art historian, curator, writer and a painter. A former Chief Curator at the Nassau County Museum of Art in Long Island and director of the Roslyn Landmarks Society, Perrell is a co-founder of [Artful Circle](#) which offers educational programming, art tours and outsourced museum services. A graduate of Hofstra University, Perrell currently serves on the Board of Trustees of the Heckscher Museum and the Bermuda National Gallery.

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