

## Armory Week 2017

### The Satellite Fairs

To say that this year's Armory Week satellite fairs were all over the map would be true in both a geographical and metaphorical sense. From Volta immediately next door to the Armory Show on Pier 90 to Art on Paper a mile's walk from the East Broadway subway station, not to mention the six others in between, anyone trying to take in all of these fairs would wear out good bit of shoe leather.

All of these satellite fairs acknowledge the precedence of The Armory Show, but as there are only a few days in which to see them, and because very few people attempt to see everything anyway, there exists a slightly ridiculous competition between them. Recognizing this competition, what follows is a checklist of this week's fairs in order of increasing quality.

Sadly the wooden spoon goes without question to CLiO, which somewhat ironically touted itself as "the anti-fair". Staged on a couple of floors of a studio building on West 26<sup>th</sup> Street and presenting only a handful of artists, it offered nothing [sic] of significance.

SPRING/BREAK was more noteworthy though it was still a bit of a disappointment. This fair has been going since 2012 and this year it featured well over a hundred booths and took place in the empty office suites of the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> floors of the skyscraper at 4 Times Square. Unfortunately some of the work on display was rather less interesting than the vertiginous view from the building's windows.

There was however provocative and entertaining work by Londoner Kosmo Vinyl (who turns out to have once managed iconic rockers The Clash) from his *Cisco Kid vs Donald Trump* series (2016-17). Originally created as Instagram posts, these single-frame cartoon images are given new meaning by the addition of speech balloons that clearly address the current political situation. *The First Amendment? He don't give a damn for it!* one reads.

Phil Buehler's *American Trilogy* photography installation offered a far more serious political commentary. It comprised three large-scale 360 degree photographs hung as cycloramas that visitors could enter. One depicts Arlington Cemetery, the second the Women's March on Washington of January 21, and the third the street in Ferguson, Missouri where Mike Brown was killed. They are technical tours de force, but more importantly they are eloquent reminders of the obstacles facing contemporary America.

NADA is the New Art Dealers Alliance. It is also the name of the alliance's fair, which comes next in order of success, and which was the least formal fair in New York last week. It took place in a cavernous industrial space that could only be accessed by a

huge goods lift, and featured the smallest booths anywhere. Some were no bigger than a broom cupboard. Many of the young artists showing here, and many of the dealers representing them, clearly despise even the suggestion of earnestness and instead value the appearances of ephemerality. This is tricky territory to work in and sadly a lot of the work on the more than 100 booths here was rather forgettable. Carbon 12 gallery from Dubai provided an exception in their pairing of Phillip Mueller's painterly representations of bare mountains with Monika Grabuschnigg's earthenware sculptures. Grabuschnigg's *Relics* are peculiar objects suggesting decorated warheads and abstracted personages in equal measure. It turns out that their surface decoration derives from the stylized versions of military hardware that have appeared in Afghan rugs since the 1980s.

Art on Paper presented more than 80 dealers offering almost anything you can think of that is paper-based, and a few other things as well. There were some diverting little video pieces by Peter Sarkisian and, the best thing in the fair, a bit of performance art by James Stroud who is director of Center Street Studio in Massachusetts. Stroud has been working with performance artist Brian Andrew Whitely to produce rubbings of the *Trump Tombstone* that Whitely located in Central Park last spring. (It was seized by the police and Whitely was subsequently questioned by the Secret Service.) At Art on Paper Stroud drew an appreciative crowd as he crouched over the tombstone and made a series of rubbings from it. These are being produced in an edition of 100.

**Scope** is not a young fair any more. It has been around for more than 15 years and has been staged on more than 70 occasions. It was once one of the more interesting fairs, offering some of the most stimulating new work on the annual fair calendar. Now unfortunately it seems to have lost its way and become the refuge for dealers showing the bright and shiny, the gimmicky, the decorative, and the coyly pornographic. There are exceptions of course, but you cannot help wonder how long galleries like Ricco /Maresca and Lelia Mordoch will want to stick around. **Lelia Mordoch had the best booth this year. It was dedicated to the compelling surrealist sculptures of Keith Long**, who is able to fashion fragments of old furniture into peculiar new appearances that suggest portraits, figures, or fantastical creatures. His work suggests a rather more representational and rather funnier version of Louise Nevelson.

If there was a prize for coolest show of the week, the people showing at Independent would undoubtedly regard it as theirs. Staged on four floors of the Spring Studios on Varick Street, it featured beautifully presented and sparely hung booths with plenty of space around them. There was however a powerful atmosphere of exclusivity around many of the displays. Several dealers provided neither wall labels nor checklists, and perhaps did not realize how daunting the uninitiated might find this. Or perhaps they did.

The best booth here was Andrew Edlin Gallery's solo show of the sculptures and

drawings of Beverly Buchanan (1940-2015). Their subject is what she called “shacks”: the primitive buildings cobbled together as dwellings by impoverished African-American farm labourers in the southern states of America. She regarded these little things as portraits of the people who lived in such inadequate conditions, and this booth was one of the more telling to be found anywhere this Armory Week.

Volta was excellent this year. Its format is simple: galleries present curated shows of work by a single artist (or in a handful of cases by two artists). This allows visitors a rather better comprehension of an artist’s oeuvre than a single work in the company of all sorts of other things, and not surprisingly the single-artist booth is appearing increasingly in the other fairs as well.

There was a good deal of stimulation to be had on the hundred or so booths here this year. Particularly striking was the booth presented by Luis de Jesus Los Angeles featuring seven video works by Federico Solmi. Each of these single-screen pieces is surrounded by a splendid cartoonish frame depicting gold and scarlet curtains and a gold crest. Solmi’s jerky animations feature a gallery of grotesque caricatures from the history of powerful leaders – both virtuous and evil. The members of this “Brotherhood” are shown disporting themselves in parades and banquets and include George Washington, Genghis Khan, Bismarck, Mussolini, and – in new works being shown here for the first time, Donald Trump.

Volta was only outdone this year by The Art Show, which is organized by the Art Dealers Association of America at the Park Avenue Armory. There was a time when the people at ADAA tried to pretend that their fair was more important than the Armory Show itself. That just seems silly nowadays, but The Art Show does have a pretty secure grasp on second place in the pecking order.

There were several excellent booths at ADAA this year. 303 Gallery devoted their booth to a huge Rodney Graham lightbox triptych *Antiquarian Sleeping in his Shop* (2017). As well as being very funny, Graham looks increasingly like a major realist artist. The expanding cast of imaginary characters that he impersonates in his work is matched by the complexity of their personalities and the physical detail he uses to explore those personalities. The objects that surround the sleeping shopkeeper in this piece were all found in actual antique shops in Graham’s hometown of Vancouver, and it is this sort of attention to detail that reinforces the sense that each of Graham’s invented characters is a slightly pathetic Everyman.

Next door to 303 Gallery was James Cohen Gallery’s booth which was given over to 11 exquisite little abstract paintings by Scott Olson, who has a solo show opening at Cohan’s Grand Street gallery on March 10. His paintings are fascinating artifacts. On the one hand they seem to step directly out of the history of high modernist abstraction (Gorky and Klee are repeatedly brought to mind) but they are also quite conscious synesthetic equivalents to Olson’s work in digital music.

There probably were not many people who got to all of these fairs. Those who did would have realized very quickly that there is an enormous amount of art being made out there in the world and a lot of people who want to present, curate, and promote it. There are even more people who want to sell it and who are sufficiently confident of potential buyers to go into business to do so. But even in the face of such proliferation, and whether or not they were looking to purchase something, visitors to last week's fairs would have realized that you have to look at a lot of work before you find something wonderful. Still, the fact that artists continue to make work that can cause a viewer to stop and think, or even to begin thinking in new ways, is the basic reason why art fairs exist in the first place.