The New York Times

What to See at New York's Art Fairs This Week

By JASON FARAGO and MARTHA SCHWENDENER MARCH 2, 2017

They've all come to town, the dealers and the collectors and the curators and the freeloaders: It's Armory Week in New York, a saturnalia of art and air kissing. So dive in! Art fairs are, at their core, commercial enterprises — and, as the market undergoes a violent course correction after years of helium-inflated prices, revenues from fairs constitute a growing fraction of galleries' yearly takes. But fairs, even for those of us who don't collect, have their uses. They condense the sprawling art world to just about manageable size, and bring to Manhattan dealers from locales as distant as Tokyo, Cape Town, São Paulo ... and Brooklyn. They're prime people-watching territory, too, and increasingly good places to snag a drink.

A dozen art fairs take place this weekend, but we've decided to focus on four. The Armory Show, held on two cruise-ship piers jutting into the Hudson River, is the largest and loudest; uptown, at the Park Avenue Armory, is the statelier Art Show, mounted by an art dealers' professional association; and downtown are NADA and the Independent, trendier fairs with parallel but distinct approaches to young art. My colleagues and I spent the last few days traipsing through their aisles, gorging in their snack bars, scoping out the collectors' tote bags and wishing we'd worn more sensible shoes. What follows is an opinionated guide to New York's busiest art week: what to see, what to skip and how to master an overload of cultural stimulation. JASON FARAGO

Mary Ann Smith

The Art Show: The Establishment Gig

This is the smallest, oldest and most exclusive of the fairs. It's on the Upper East Side and proud of it. Only galleries admitted to the A.D.A.A. exhibit here, and it is sometimes noticeably slow to invite dealers it considers too flashy. Gala night, which raises lots of cash for the Henry Street Settlement, is a major event with a finely gradated social hierarchy: How early you get in is determined by your charitable contribution, or your hunger to buy. Since many of the galleries are from New York, the fair increasingly presents single artists, which makes it more interesting for those not buying: Think of the goods as mini-exhibitions. What the dealers wear: fox stoles, Chanel pantsuits, kitten heels (high enough to look formal but comfortable enough to be on your feet for a while).

AB-EXERS IN LOVE Partners in life and art, Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner wrenched New York into the first rank of modern art capitals in the 1940s. An impressive display of Pollock's drawings, at the booth of the stalwart Washburn Gallery, includes both early, Picassoid scribbles — think bulls and ghouls — and a delicately worked sketch on a cigarette box. But a display of late collages by Krasner, in the Paul Kasmin Gallery, here at the Art Show, is dreary; by the '80s, her mélanges of shapes and stains had grown decidedly mannered. Better Abstract Expressionism is at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery booth, which showcases the stormy paintings of Norman Lewis, and in the Manny Silverman Gallery, where you'll find a jazzy composition of dots and crosses by Bradley Walker Tomlin.

DISCARDED, PRESERVED While New York preened, Paris retrenched. A rip-roaring display of works by the French-American artist Arman, in the Sperone Westwater booth, unites a dozen of his 1960s assemblages, in which everyday junk — light bulbs, doll parts, rusty faucets — is shoved into glass boxes or immured in resin blocks. They are signal accomplishments of Nouveau Réalisme, a more downbeat cousin of American Pop, that is at last winning greater consideration on this side of the Atlantic. Arman's "Accumulations" troubled boundaries between high and low in the '60s, though today they appeal principally for ecological reasons: These are solidified evidence of an economy of waste.

FACES OF FEAR Two adjacent booths jolt this somewhat sedate fair with bad-mannered figuration. In Julie Saul, 17 recent watercolors by Pavel Pepperstein, a sardonic Russian artist, depict Jacqueline Kennedy as a cartoon character in mythological extremis, carried forth by satyrs or kneeling before the goddess Athena. Next door, in Petzel's booth, the take-no-prisoners artist Joyce Pensato shows monstrous yet compelling portraits of other American figures: six paintings of a demented Bart Simpson, rendered in drippy enamel, and a dead-eyed Homer, in smudged charcoal.

LADIES FIRST More smudged charcoal is at the booth of Marc Selwyn Fine Art, from Beverly Hills, filled with drawings by the American master Lee Bontecou. The only woman to show with the dealer Leo Castelli in the 1960s, Ms. Bontecou is best known for her fierce wall-mounted sculptures of burlap and canvas, but her drawings, of eyes and teeth and uncertain orifices, also turn space into absorbing voids, thanks to passages of heavy black. (Another fine work by her is in the Mnuchin Gallery booth, two spaces away.) Selwyn has paired Ms. Bontecou's drawings with others by Jay DeFeo, but the match is uneven: The latter's peculiar, angular graphite works appear lightweight next to Ms. Bontecou's intense capriccios.

INTO THE WOODS A few booths at the A.D.A.A. fair have impressive showcases of art before 1900. Thomas Colville Fine Art is presenting more than a dozen landscapes by George Inness, a 19th-century painter who stands as an American cousin to Corot, Millet and the rest of the French Barbizon school. Where other American landscapists went for Manifest Destiny posturing, Inness favored splotchy, atmospheric renderings of fens and lakesides that may put you in mind of Emerson and Thoreau.

PHOTOS WITHOUT CAMERAS The booth of the photography specialist Hans P. Kraus Jr. contains perhaps the most beguiling work in the fair: "British Algae," a book by the English botanist Anna Atkins that documents aquatic plants via cyanotypes, or impressions on photosensitive blue paper. Dating to around 1850, it's the first book to be illustrated with photographs, though no camera was necessary to make the images. These spectral photograms are the work of an ardent amateur, and a passport to an age when reproductive imagery was still a thing of wonder. They're also a good reminder that, in art as in science, women were pioneers until institutions shut them out. JASON FARAGO

The Armory Show: Behemoth of the Piers

The Armory Show, founded by young art dealers, started out scruffy and small. Now it's a behemoth — the largest art fair in New York — and often not too picky, so you may see the widest range of credible to semi-credible art here. Rest areas have been added to ease the slog to the end of the piers and back. Pier 92 is principally early- to mid-20th-century work, and interesting for the marginal, overlooked artists; Pier 94 is contemporary. It is still a bit of a zoo; lots of the blue-chip dealers retreated to The Art Show or just wait until Frieze rolls around in May. The Armory attracts American collectors ready to spend. (Think museum board members from Chicago or Dallas making an annual New York trip.) What the dealers wear: art-world standard, tight blue suits, discreetly expensive A-line dresses.

Mary Ann Smith

MADE IN JAPAN On Pier 92, the veteran Tokyo gallery Whitestone has assembled an impressive three-handed booth of quite different abstract paintings by women: Yayoi Kusama, Atsuko Tanaka and Yuko Nasaka. Tanaka, a leading figure of Gutai, harnessed that movement's disruptive energy to paint messy circuits of hot colors, while Ms. Nasaka, also a Gutai veteran, created mellower reliefs whose concentric circles recall the raked forms of Zen stone gardens. Ms. Kusama, the subject of a major retrospective at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, split the difference: One of her paintings of an "infinity net," or irregular white lattice, is at once meditative and fraught. (A giant, rather silly new piece by Ms. Kusama, of polka-dotted protuberances on a field of artificial grass, appears as a commissioned work on Pier 94.)

I AM A CAMERA Richard Saltoun of London has another all-female booth, with an all-star cast of photoconceptualists who used the camera to picture women's bodies in deformed or disguised states: Eleanor Antin, Francesca Woodman, Valie Export, Hannah Wilke, Ana Mendieta, Sanja Ivekovic, and the beat goes on. In such august company, two less familiar names are especially impressive. Helena Almeida, from Portugal, performed theatrical gestures for the camera, then smeared the prints that resulted with blue pigment, as if she were painting from inside the image. And Renate Bertlmann, from Austria, donned wigs, hats and glasses for dozens of "Transformations" (1969) — a decade before Cindy Sherman also performed for the camera as feminine archetypes.

COMMODITY TRADE Pier 92 also features a rebooted Focus section: Once devoted to a single geographical region, it's now a more diverse affair with a subtly political bent. (It's been organized by Jarrett Gregory, a young curator who recently left the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.) The Berlin gallery KOW has two figures in chocolate — depicting "art collectors," haggard and misformed — by sculptors of the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League, whose brilliant show continues at SculptureCenter in Queens. Nearby, in the booth of the Rhona Hoffman Gallery from Chicago, is a photo the American artist Deana Lawson shot in the Democratic Republic of Congo: a young man, smiling on a deserted road, with bunches of bananas framing his head like a fright wig. Both use the commodities Westerners buy from Congo to rewire expectations of African representation, and to give poor Congolese an independence that the global economy denies them.

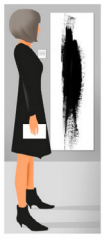
SHADES OF GRAY On the overstuffed Pier 94, the quality varies even more than usual this year — and in places the schlock gets so thick you may rue paying a $50 admission. (Chelsea galleries, after all, are free to visit.) A moment of respite comes from the Galleria d'Arte Maggiore from Bologna, which has brought a wide span of paintings by Giorgio Morandi: his absorbing still lifes in mucky grays and browns, but also more unusual paintings like a street scene rendered in pale pink and khaki. They're paired here with spare abstractions by the Korean painter Lee Ufan, which feature just a few evidentiary strokes of gray paint on white. In historical terms the pairing is questionable; visually, it's lovely.

UP IN THE AIR Jeffrey Deitch has put together Pier 94's most talked-about booth: a tribute to Florine Stettheimer, the society hostess and modernist innovator, who, in 1920, painted a stunning beach scene whose figures are principally African-American. (It was sold at this very fair in 2012, after being deaccessioned from Fisk University.) Mr. Deitch has ringed Stettheimer's frothy, joyous, but also radically decomposed scene with works by later inheritors of her style, including Laura Owens and Cecily Brown; the booth itself is a shocking magenta and is framed by plastic curtains that echo Stettheimer's set design for the opera "Four Saints in Three Acts."

FROM WHOLE CLOTH In Presents, the young gallery sector on Pier 94, the most impressive booth is that of the Mariane Ibrahim Gallery of Seattle. It's presenting an absorbing series by the young Ghanaian artist Zohra Opoku: most prominently, suspended fabrics that she has screen-printed with images of her father, whom she did not know. The grainy imagery, in which Ms. Opoku's father, now dead, appears in the regalia of a traditional chief, scrambles personal histories and political narratives to gripping effect. Blank, a Cape Town gallery, features wall-mounted works with a feminist charge by Turiya Magadlela, formed by stretching pantyhose — in "flesh" colors, whatever that means in South Africa — across canvases. JASON FARAGO

Through Sunday; Piers 92 and 94, at 12th Avenue and 55th Street; thearmoryshow.com

The Cool Spot: Independent New York


Mary Ann Smith

The Independent, a little younger than NADA, has matured the most while still maintaining an inscrutable hipness. It's lost some of its punk edge since moving from the old Dia building to a fashion-shoot location. Once for young galleries only, increasingly the fair has pulled established names who prefer the cooler-than-thou vibe (Paula Cooper, Gavin Brown). The fair has always tried to avoid the traditional booth layout, with designs by different architects. This was interesting and stylish, but also irritating because everything tended to blend together. The dealers are from New York, Europe and Central and South America. You tend to see a lot of interesting, sometimes great stuff that is not yet widely known in New York. What the dealers wear: Many, many people will be in black, which makes those who don't look, well, independent.

New York galleristas at the Independent have an excellent selection of objects by artists whose work is either familiar or has been seen here before. Jack Tilton is showing a group of collages by Derrick Adams that furthers some of the concerns around portraiture and identity in his recent, grandly scaled exhibition at Pioneer Works in Red Hook, Brooklyn. Nikki Maloof's paintings of a nocturnal interior with insects on the windows wraps around the walls in Jack Hanley's booth. Barbara Bloom's installation at David Lewis — a series of posters begun in the early 1980s that juxtaposes terrorism and tourism — serves as a warm-up for an exhibition of '80s art at the Hirshhorn next year, and Anna Betbeze presents sculptures in front of ruglike wall works at Jay Gorney.

Works by Melike Kara at Peres Projects, her first showing in New York. Linda Rosier for The New York Times

In addition to catching up on local news, a primary reason to visit any of the art fairs is to learn about new art and visit the booths of out-of-town galleries, and the Independent delivers this year. Peres Projects is showing the work of Melike Kara, a German artist of Turkish descent who studied with Rosemarie Trockel in Düsseldorf. Ms. Kara's baby-blue and burgundy canvases with masklike figures are shown alongside her sculptures, which derive from marks and figures in the paintings. This is Ms. Kara's first showing in New York.

A near first for New York is the work of Michel Journiac, on view at the Paris gallery Christophe Gaillard. In the '70s, Mr. Journiac dressed up as movie stars — large black-and-white photographs here pay homage to Rita Hayworth — and impersonated his parents in a work called "Homage to Freud" (1972). Mr. Journiac, currently in a show about '70s and '80s French counterculture at the Maison Rouge in Paris, is pertinent for the moment and conversations around shifting gender identities.

The British artist David Shrigley is hardly unknown in New York, but his installation at Anton Kern reprises an unfinished musical project he created recently in Toulouse, France, in which he made instruments and treated the gallery as a rehearsal studio. Lee Ranaldo, from the band Sonic Youth, performed on Mr. Shrigley's instruments on Wednesday evening. You can see Mr. Shrigley's drawings on kick drum heads and his instruments scattered around as soundless sculptures in Kern's booth. MARTHA SCHWENDENER

NADA New York: The Young Crowd

Mary Ann Smith

Founded by young dealers in the 2000s, this nonprofit fair has matured into a going concern. It's medium-size, with small to very small enterprises, sometimes in closet-size spaces. It is a great place to get a sense of the new and the now. The fair is heavy on painting. It does a nice job bringing galleries from outside the art-world capitals (Richmond, Va.; San Juan, P.R.; upstate New York; Brooklyn) and still has the let's-put-on-a-show ethos of its youth. Where the kids go. What the dealers wear: obscure Japanese denim and white sneakers.

While other art fairs look abroad, promoting it's-a-small-world ideas of global art, NADA feels focused on the current American political landscape (as much as an art fair can be, perhaps). Half of NADA's ticket sales this year are being donated to the American Civil Liberties Union, and several of the fair's projects are picking up the slack in government arts funding.

ProjectArt is showing juvenile drawings by artists (one by the painter Will Cotton was made when he was 7) in the mini-show "My Kid Could Do That," which supports a free art school for children, taught by emerging contemporary artists. (Wide Rainbow, which also has a booth here, provides after-school arts programming.)

A number of performances in NADA's programming series center on politics or United States policy. "Revolution Is the Solution" proclaims a large photographic mural (in Spanish) in the booth shared by the Los Angeles gallerists Commonwealth & Council and Skibum MacArthur. Contemporary Drag, organized by Gordon Robichaux (the artists Sam Gordon and Jacob Robichaux), includes performances, video screenings, panel discussions and a clothing line as it looks back at Stonewall and the drag-queen scene from the 1980s and '90s. It feels celebratory and activist.

Small, single-artist projects, often mounted or paid for by the artists themselves, are abundant throughout the fair. Athena Papadopoulos is showing ruddy sculptures at Shoot the Lobster that are made with fur (her father was a furrier) and that look like hanging meat. Artist-run initiatives like 106 Green and False Flag are in micro-booths nearby.

Small, single-artist projects, often mounted or paid for by the artists themselves, are abundant throughout the fair. Athena Papadopoulos is showing ruddy sculptures at Shoot the Lobster that are made with fur (her father was a furrier) and that look like hanging meat. Artist-run initiatives like 106 Green and False Flag are in micro-booths nearby.

The fair is still a showcase for emerging artists who are working in inventive media or who were trailblazers in various forms. Lee Quiñones, a graffiti artist, has new panel paintings at Nicole Klagsbrun, alongside the invigorating ceramic works of Brie Ruais. Ms. Ruais scrapes and molds clay on the floor before firing and installing it vertically. At 315 Gallery, Amy Brener's hanging silicone sculptures feature casts of everyday objects; nearby in the same booth, Brendan Smith and Henry Barrett offer furniture carved out of Corafoam, a synthetic wood. Yours Mine & Ours has Jeremy Couillard's silly sculpture of an alien seated at a computer, surrounded by other artists' work. The presentation considers communication, feedback and some version of the future. Installed in this bunkerlike space, once a loading dock for the trains that used to run along what is now the High Line, the whole fair feels like a time capsule filled with objects looking both forward and backward. MARTHA SCHWENDENER

The Perfect Art Weekend

Every art lover has to chart a singular path through the madness of this week. You can't see it all, and alongside the fairs are gallery openings, new public art installations and parties, to boot. But if you want to hit the superfecta of the week's principal art fairs, here's a weekend itinerary.

FRIDAY: Devote the early evening to the Armory Show, the largest of the fairs. Arrive at 4 p.m., which will give you a solid four hours to navigate its 200-plus booths. Entering at Pier 94, work your way through the fair's more contemporary half, pausing at the pier's end for a cocktail at the Grand Army pop-up bar. Then mount the rickety staircase to Pier 92; once you've finished there, take the elevator down and *escape*. There's nowhere to eat nearby, if you exclude the Hustler Club across the West Side Highway.

SATURDAY: Your downtown day. Put on your black jeans, take the No. 1 train to Houston Street, and start at NADA, which opens at 11 a.m. You'll need a full three hours for its 100-odd booths. If you're puckish afterward, get a sandwich from the "cross-cultural" pop-up concession of Gaddy Lane from Brooklyn; for more fortification, you're a 10-minute walk from Raoul's, still an art-world favorite, which serves a hallowed burger au poivre at lunch. From there, it's a few blocks to the Independent, whose 48 booths can be seen in two hours or so, and whose glass-walled aerie off Canal Street offers killer views of the sunset over the Hudson.

SUNDAY: Galleries uptown are closed today, so take in a museum show before lunch: perhaps the fine retrospective of Marisa Merz, an Arte Povera stalwart, at the Met Breuer. Eat at Flora, the museum's on-the-money new restaurant (order the lobster-and-crab dumplings!), then walk down Park Avenue to the A.D.A.A. fair. Three hours here should suffice for the 72 booths, easy to navigate along four aisles. Then drift up to the Carlyle and have a martini. You're an art soldier, and you've earned it. JASON FARAGO

Correction: March 4, 2017
A brief review on Friday of one of four art fairs underway in New York misstated the name of the young galleries' section at the Armory Show. It is Presents, not Projects. And a review of another of the fairs, NADA, referred incorrectly to its exhibit of "My Kid Could Do That." The drawings by young artists in that exhibition are on loan for the show; they are not for sale.