What To Buy At Expo Chicago

BY SCOTT INDRISK | SEPTEMBER 23, 2016

Several galleries take advantage of their booths to mount cohesive environments. Bortolami pairs smoke-and-soot-on-wood “paintings” by Claudio Parmiggiani (including a massive, multi-paned, ghostly outline of a bookshelf) with mixed-media sculptures by Nicolas Guagnini, like a bulbous anatomical glazed ceramic resting atop a monograph of Paul Cézanne and a charred-looking wooden plank. Carrie Secrist Gallery has created an immersive room for abstract painter Shannon Finley, whose geometric-psychedelic motifs are echoed in patterns that spill across the walls and floor. The Chicago Artists Coalition has an installation by emerging artist Leonardo Suryawana, featuring paper sculptures of furniture and fruit along with absurdly surreal photographic portraits.

A joint booth from Casati Gallery and Galerie Peter Kilchmann accomplishes an admirable feat: Carving out a little bubble of chic domesticity within the typically overwhelming and impersonal atmosphere of a fair. The former dealer contributes furniture and design items, while the latter brings accompanying artworks. They’re arranged in juxtapositions that let you imagine what it might like to be that exceedingly uncommon combo: rich and tasteful. (I’m coveting a circa 1954 writing desk by Franco Albini that is joined here by a Hernan Bas painting — louche young man smoking, exotic bird — and a delicately tiny canvas by Francis Alys.)

Anthony Meier Fine Arts also evinces a fine eye for understated arrangements, showing work that all has a strong sense of texture and materiality. Gareth Mason’s violently forceful ceramics make sense with Mark Hagen’s acrylic-on-burlap patterned abstraction and a baby-blue Donald Moffett. Matthew Marks Gallery is another stand-out, playing with scale and mixing the understated with the in-your-face. A stunning photorealist painting of two coins by Paul Sietsma hangs near two small resin sculptures (of a rat, and the Virgin Mary), by Katharina Fritsch, but the booth’s focal point is another Fritsch piece: A halting ink-and-acrylic-on-plastic reproduction of the Chicago skyline, a slice of kitsch rendered cool by context.

Roberto Paradise Gallery — a San Juan, Puerto Rico outfit that, full disclosure, is currently showing a series of cut paintings by yours truly down on the island — brings paintings by Sean Gannon and hyper-realistic, labor-intensive sculptures by Chris Bradley to Expo. (The former are pared-down, flashy abstractions that depict bodies turned into landscapes — however sexualized they read on your own dirty mind. Pervert.)

The highlight of Mier Gallery’s nearby booth is a set of paintings done on mirrored foil by Danish artist Peter Bonde, a one-time collaborator of Jason Rhoades and Paul McCarthy who hadn’t shown in the States for decades until the Los Angeles dealer gave him a recent solo. At Chicago’s Andrew Rafter, two painters are worth your attention: Justin John Greene, who contributes an oddly moving, cartoonish portrait of a young man checking his cell phone in a fancy apartment; and Tracy Thomason, whose mixed-media canvases (oil, marble dust, activated charcoal) recall a more intimate detour from the legacy of Peter Halley and Donald Moffett.

As for Expo’s best solo presentation, that honor has to go to Peres Projects, which is showing shaped canvases by Blain Thurman. They’re each over six feet tall, and illuminated by a series of bare, eye-stinging florescent lights set into the booth’s walls. Abstract in form, they hint toward the figurative — I personally saw the outlines of consumer packaging, film reels, dentist’s tools, windows, aerial tangles of highways, vaginal intimations. I love how unnerving they are, and the way they must simultaneously court and repel the average collector — these sculpted objects, flashy and easy at first glance, yet so deeply, and proudly, strange.