

Bustling Armory Opening Heralds Contemporary Art Market Resurgence

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Work by Adam McEwen at Nicole Klagsbrun's booth

NEW YORK—The VIP preview of the Armory Show's contemporary-art-focused Pier 94 fair found collectors and dealers in ebullient spirits, with sales — some boosted by the new Whitney Biennial — having a strong start out of the gate, and a celebrity-studded crowd eagerly touring from booth to booth. But while talk hovered around the subject of the long hoped-for market recovery, a more interesting development was the proliferation of strong, curated booths that eschewed the traditional art-fair approach of glitz and glam for a sustained look at a single artist's work.

Solo artist booths were everywhere you looked. Armory Show veteran David Zwirner had his booth elegantly installed with a series of photographs by Philip-Lorca diCorcia, with the centerpiece being a series of unique Polaroids that wrapped around the space. "When the market is slower, it gives you time to reassess," he said. "You can get into a rut with art fairs, and they can be great venues if you think about them intelligently. We want to do something exciting with fairs." But the time of retrenchment and focusing on quality simply because sales were low seems to be over, according to the dealer, who said the mood at the fair "is like night and day", compared to a year ago. "People are looking and are excited that they can buy art," he said. By mid-afternoon he had already parted with 25 of the small Polaroids, which are priced at \$4,000 apiece.

Another head-turning offering that wouldn't have looked amiss in a museum project room was PaceWildenstein's booth devoted to New York-based artist Tony Feher. Enclosed within a minimalistic space with black-painted walls, it consisted of three tables arrayed with colorful detritus — plastic bottles half filled with colored water, wooden cast-offs studded with brightly-hued pins, crumpled cans, a pot of growing grass — in a way that appealingly resembled low-rent curiosity cabinets. The assemblages, priced at \$150,000, would be bold choices for a collector, showing a side of Feher's work that many may not be familiar with.

San Juan and New York-based collector Alberto de la Cruz who was making the rounds of the fair with fellow Puerto Rican collector Pepe Alvarez, was a fan of the solo booths. "In the old days dealers used to just pack their booths with work by a lot of different artists," he said. "Now they're using them as an extension of the gallery. It's much better that way."

Many, but not all, of the single-artists booths were produced by New York galleries. Paul Kasmin, who had a solo show of paintings by James Nares, has embraced the strategy at the Armory for the past three years. "It makes great sense, I have to say, because I already have a gallery in New York," he said. "When I do fairs out of town I tend to do something more representative of the gallery as a whole." The approach seemed to be working this year. Of the works on offer, ranging from \$85,000 to \$175,000 for the biggest, taxi-cab-length, canvas, one sold for \$95,000 and two for \$85,000. Said Kasmin: "The bigger one is on reserve — they're measuring their walls."

Nares, who was on hand at the booth, said he was pleased with the way his work was displayed. "The only way to do an art fair is to take a close look at what catches your eye, to give it a sustained look," he said. "I think people are quite thankful to see one booth that is a little bit more all of a piece."

Other New York galleries with solo booths were Nicole Klagsbrun, which held had a show of all-yellow work by Adam McEwen — including a yellow Caster Semenaya obit, a yellow swastika, and two yellowed chewing gum rorschach pieces — displayed above buzzingly-bright yellow carpet; Canada, which showed work by the hard-edge psychedelic painter Xylor Jane; Elizabeth Dee, who produced a tight show of work by Josephine Meckseper, including a large-scale installation that coyly referenced her video in the current Whitney Biennial; Orchard Street's Rachel Uffner, who showed Hillary Harnischfeger; and Museum 52, showing David Brooks.

The sheer number of solo shows seemed to indicate that dealers felt the growing interest in art over the past few years that began with the heady, money-driven days of the boom had matured during the recession into a genuine interest in engaging with an artist's work. Mary Ceruti, director of New York's SculptureCenter, posited that the trendiness that characterized the boom may have also evolved into something more sophisticated. "I think people are betting on the crowd's desire to look more thoroughly and in-depth than just gravitating to the work by the hot person," she said. "People want to learn a little and spend more time with the work, so I think the general intent is to generate more interest in an artist's body of work, because then it gets much less speculative and it's more about really enjoying it."

Some galleries, in fact, seemed more interested in putting on quality exhibitions than chasing a market. Dusseldorf's Sies + Höke, for instance, actually went so far as to import to the fair a solo show of Kris Martin's work that was recently at the Aspen Art Museum. Consisting of eight crude menhir-like slabs of Colorado sandstone capped with tiny white paper crosses, the group — a series called "Summit" — made a striking impression in the booth's prominent corner. However, all of the works had already sold prior to the Armory, according to a gallery employee, who said fairs are "not always about selling." (The booth also displayed works by Thomas Kiesmetter, Claudia Weiser, and Markus Vater.)

Thomas Bernard of Cortex Athletico, a first-time Armory exhibitor from Bordeaux, said he felt the solo shows were an outgrowth of a more educated contemporary-art market. "I like that now people take time," he said. "Because of the crisis, a lot of really shitty works have been moved away. With art fairs, some people come for the market and some people come for the art, and when the market goes down, the art goes up. Before it was kind of like speed dating, and there were pieces that were like prostitutes, with short dresses. Now people take their time and really look thoroughly. I think you see more people with cameras and notepads walking about."

Many of those people walking about, as has become usual for marquee art events, had famous faces. Jason Schwartzman, a visibly pregnant Sofia Coppola, Francis McDormand, and James Frey were among the celebrities mingling with the heavy-duty collector crowd, which included the Rubells, Marty Eisenberg, David Teiger, and Marty Margulies. REM frontman Michael Stipe, half-heartedly disguised in a blue knit cap and glasses with thick black frames, was spotted lingering in the booth of New York gallery Sean Kelly. Business on his mind, Kelly said the mood felt far more upbeat than last year, and that he already has sold pieces and had others put on reserve to trustees of the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum. He sold a painting by Calum Innes, whose show is on view at Kelly's gallery; several photographs by Marina Abramovic, who is opening a show at the MoMA this week; and almost all the photographs by James Casebere, who is currently in the Biennial. (Other Biennial artists who fared well at the fair were Tauba Auerbach, at Jack Hanley, and Danny McDonald, who sold both his pieces at Broadway 1602 for \$12,000 and \$17,000.)

If solo booths were one trend at this year's Armory Show, another was the inclusion of a number of first-time exhibitors from New York's Lower East Side, like Rental and Eleven Rivington. The former parted with nearly everything in the booth, including a large sculpture by L.A. artist Phil Wagner for \$6,000 that led collectors who didn't get that piece to buy Wagner's work from a concurrent exhibition at the gallery. The latter sold two Jacob Kassay silver paintings at \$9,000 apiece and a marble pillow sculpture by Valeska Soares for \$90,000.

Sales at the fair looked to be strong across the board, and in some cases there were shades of the feeding frenzy that marked the boom years. Pepe Alvarez, the Puerto Rican collector, headed straight to Italian dealer Massimo de Carlo's booth early in the day, only to find that there were already multiple reserves on work he wanted by young New York artists Dan Colen and Nate Lowman. Over at the booth of Berlin and Leipzig-based gallery Eigen+Art, unflappable proprietor Judy Lybke was to be found placing multiple reserves on the paintings in his solo show of David Schnell, priced from \$25,000 to \$135,000. "The mood is really great," says Lybke, a longtime Armory exhibitor. "People aren't buying like this," he said, snapping his fingers, "but I think tomorrow we will sell a lot." Beth Rudin de Woody bought Nari Ward's piece, *Tow*, 2009, from New York gallery Lehmann Maupin, which sold another work by Ward, *Chase Weather Map*, 2010, to a New York collector in the \$30-35,000 range.

There is only so much that a single event can tell us about the state of the market, but trend-spotters were out in force, reading the tea leaves. "Younger dealers with low overhead and lots of flexibility are in recovery mode," says Andras Szanto, a writer and consultant who was formerly director of the National Arts Journalism Program (NAJP) at Columbia University. "Others who are saddled with bigger operations are having a tougher time. But work is definitely selling. Here, as elsewhere in the art world, there is the sense, warranted or not, that we've turned a corner."