

Rewards and Clarity in a Show of Restraint

By ROBERTA SMITH FEB. 19, 2009

It's not clear if art fairs are dying or going back to their "used to be," in the words sung by Bessie Smith. Either way, this year's Art Show, courtesy of the Art Dealers Association of America, is pretty much "same as it ever was," to borrow from David Byrne.

Razzle-dazzle spectacle, stampeding collectors and buy-it-now pressure-cooking has never been the Art Show's style; neither has aisle upon aisle of booths stretching as far as the eye can see. But the times may be catching up with it.

The Art Show was founded in 1989. This year's version has, as usual, just 70 participants. It serves as a reminder that the boom-time art world was only a portion of a much larger, less volatile sphere. The vast majority of artists in this sphere never saw their work go to auction, much less fetch stratospheric prices there. Their boats may have floated a little higher, but they weren't swamped in dough. Most of the dealers did not have month after month of sell-out shows, nor were their rosters teeming with freshly minted M.F.A.'s.

This fair is loaded with work that you will be grateful to see. There's little grandstanding and few works that reach out and grab you by the neck. The two main exceptions: At Ronald Feldman, Tavares Strachan has hermetically sealed 20 square feet of sidewalk from New Haven — complete with dirt, moss, parking meter and signs — in an immense nautiluslike chamber set at 40 degrees, commemorating the place (and temperature) where he received a parking ticket. At James Cohan, the

centerpiece of a show called “Body as Prop” is a performance sculpture, “In Just a Blink of an Eye,” created by the Chinese artist Xu Zhen. It shows an actual, motionless person suspended midfall, as if just shot. It might almost be a Duane Hanson.

And yet, race through this fair and you may conclude it is lackluster. Seek and you will find more than enough that rewards.

Many of the best booths are devoted to one or two artists, which creates an unusual clarity. At the entrance the small, mordant paintings-on-photographs by Gerhard Richter at Marian Goodman range from holiday lightness to crime-scene darkness inhabited by phantom Sasquatches.

Michael Werner has mounted a truly inspired juxtaposition of clotted paintings by the French artist Eugène Leroy (1910-2000) and alabaster heads carved in first-century B.C. Arabia by sculptors seemingly exposed to an eclectic mix of Cycladic idols, Assyrian reliefs and who knows what else. Their pale translucence brings out the light and the figures hidden in the Leroy's forceful yet murky surfaces.

D C Moore's enchanting summary of Charles Burchfield's watercolors mixed with wallpaper designs (one of which reminded another observer of Christopher Wool) are countered at Susan Sheehan by the fiery colors of Donald Judd's woodcuts and at Matthew Marks by Ken Price's bulbously suggestive painted ceramic sculptures, seen here with strident little images of landscapes that they often inhabit.

Sikkema Jenkins has devoted its space to Merlin James's tender and wide-ranging paintings-about-painting; David Zwirner is all about Al Taylor's levitating abstractions, as Tanya Bonakdar is all about Ernest Neto's. Sperone Westwater is juxtaposing early and recent William Wegman to demonstrate his long interest in elaborating existing photographs and postcards into unexpected jokes and landscapes.

At Peter Freeman, Mel Bochner's latest word paintings mouth off — Blah, Blah, Blah, Blah, Blah — filling the eyes and ears with gorgeous Prussian blue. At Metro Pictures, Robert Longo's small, dense graphite renderings of famous paintings put his considerable drawing skills to good use, but don't tell Sherrie Levine about them.

Some galleries look to the past. Tibor de Nagy is starring Larry Rivers's early 1950s stirrings of Pop Art. Lelong has Hélio Oiticica's early excursions into abstraction from the same period. Best of all, Ameringer Yohe has a raft of muscular ink drawings that Hans Hofmann made in sunny St.-Tropez in 1929, just before the other Crash. Some look remarkably like Philip Guston's late paintings, a group of which are at David McKee.

There are arresting cross-aisle conversations, like the one about the urban sublime between Joel Sternfeld's large color photographs, with their all-seasons views of the High Line in Chelsea at Lühring Augustine, and Rackstraw Downes's compact yet wide-open realist paintings of razor-wire-topped fences in Queens at Betty Cunningham.

Ideas about figuration are in play in the paintings and drawings of Nicola Tyson at Friedrich Petzel and works by Laura Owens and Elizabeth Peyton nearby at Gavin Brown, where an alluring display of recent art books from Printed Matter and older ones from Glenn Horowitz includes comfortable seating.

Sometimes the discussions stay in the booth, like the one among Lynda Benglis, Lucio Fontana and David Altmejd at Andrea Rosen. From here take in Ms. Benglis's new cast stainless totems, in concert with lush paintings on paper by Bill Jensen at Cheim & Read.

Still, some of the best booths are those of veteran art dealers putting up a little of this and a little of that and leaving the sorting out to you.

Examples include the early Diebenkorns at John Berggruen; the vintage photographs at Fraenkel; the South American painting at CDS; and works by Myron Stout, Salvatore Scarpitta and Jackson Pollock (painted ceramic) at Joan Washburn. The Stout-like pencil abstractions by Paul Vézelay at Zabriskie, find common ground with Jim Nutt's delicate drawings of heads at David Nolan. At St. Etienne an array of German Expressionist and Austrian works on paper are headlined by drawings, pastels and prints by the indomitable Ernst Ludwig Kirchner.

At Martha Parrish & James Reinish, Marguerite Zorach catches up with Fauvism in a landscape painted in Paris in 1912, while Alfred Maurer dissects the

style stroke by stroke in a 1914 painting once owned by Arthur Dove. Next door at Achim Moeller, duck the glaring Piero Dorazio and look to the wings for a small rainbow idyll from 1914 by Robert Delaunay and a pastel of bristling forms from 1915 by Gino Severini and, backstage, three beatific paintings by Georges Rouault. At Lawrence Markey the surprises include suites of early drawings by Richard Tuttle and Jo Baer.

Knoedler's highlight is Milton Avery's "Sea and Rocks (Ten Pound Island)," a great late canvas from 1956 that may have learned a thing or two from Japanese screen painting and gardens. Its economy and evocativeness aligns with the controlled splashes of Helen Frankenthaler's "Arcadia," painted six years later (1962) at Mitchell-Innes & Nash. On the other side of the same wall the blurry symmetry of the Frankenthaler is resurrected in a Rorschach painting from 1984 by Andy Warhol.

In boom times art dealers tend to get demonized on the way up and the way down. They deserve it, some people say. But the art world's zealously tended hierarchy — artists on top, art dealers at the bottom — has never been right.

Art dealers put their money where their vision is; only artists take greater risks. They help artists do what we all hope to do: make a living at something they love. If the nonartists in the realm of art achieve this state — and some of us are privileged to do so — it is partly because of the strange, tenuous, sometimes infuriating world that art dealers help construct, one day, artist or artwork at a time.

The Art Show is at the Park Avenue Armory, at 67th Street, Friday from noon to 8 p.m.; Saturday, noon to 6 p.m.; and Monday noon to 5 p.m. \$20 per day, with all proceeds benefiting Henry Street Settlement. (212) 472-0590, armoryonpark.org.

A version of this review appears in print on , on page C25 of the National edition with the headline: Rewards and Clarity In a Show of Restraint.