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ART REVIEW

## Smooth and Safe at Pier 94

By [ROBERTA SMITH](#)

These days contemporary-art fairs tend to travel in franchised packs. A large successful fair spawns parasite copycat fairs, and before you know it, you've got an art-fair fair.

New York is having one this weekend. The Armory Show, now in its 10th incarnation, is back, accompanied by nine younger, smaller, less prestigious fairs, the most ever. Those who make their way through all of them should be honored — like the seven-summits climbers who scale the highest peak on each of the world's continents — or medicated for obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Given a downwardly spiraling economy that no doubt will affect all aspects of the art world, fairs included, this situation may be temporary. But even without the falling dollar and nervous hedge funders, there is a point at which critical mass fosters inertia.

There is nothing wrong with art fairs that fewer of them wouldn't cure. Once, they were finite tribal rituals. Dealers around the world who didn't see one another often would set up camp for a few days, experience the hive mind, exchange information (and goods) and network. The public came, first the frenzied-shopping few and the informed observers, then the general audience.

But these days, with so many fairs, dealers now see entirely too much of one another. They often spend most of their time at fairs or preparing for, or recovering from, them. And the fairs now run like clockwork, almost in their sleep, you could say.

The Armory Show on Pier 94, for example, is in top form. It lacks the stylish comforts and city-wide branding of the Frieze Fair in London, but at least it is now being held under one roof, on one pier instead of two. And there's always Chelsea, the world's biggest nonstop art fair 30 blocks to the south. The Armory doesn't have the balmy weather and exposed skin of [Art Basel Miami Beach](#), but, hey, it is happening in March, not February — this year anyway. And while it lacks [Art Basel](#)'s older European dealers, with their booths full of choice modern masters, a sense of maturity seems to have settled upon the place.

This year's Armory should take as its motto a recent poster (unfortunately not at the fair) by Mads

Lynnerup, a Danish-born artist based in San Francisco. It reads: “If you see anything interesting please let someone know immediately!” This polite elongation of the paranoid counterterrorism campaign mounted by the [Metropolitan Transportation Authority](#) in New York (“If you see something, say something”) promotes the art world’s oldest information highway: word of mouth. But the anxious tone suggests that things of interest have lately been too few and far between.

And so it is that the Armory Show goes down very smoothly, not unlike the [Whitney Biennial](#) or last summer’s [Venice Biennale](#). An air of orderly professionalism pervades; outrageousness of any kind is rare. There are no cringe-inducing moments, although the cluttered, quasi-Rauschenbergian installation cooked up by Assume Vivid Astro Focus for the exterior of the V.I.P. Lounge comes close. And there is almost nothing that makes you stop in your tracks. Yes, there is the annual tape-’n’-things sculpture by Thomas Hirschhorn. This one, “Tool Table,” is, for a change, bloodless and cerebral: a sea of mannequin hands clutching de rigueur books (Nietzsche, Sartre, Thomas More) or tools (hammer, saw, trowel). It proves how much Mr. Hirschhorn’s work needs some form of sex or violence.

The show’s smoothness extends to the layout, which is surprisingly nonhierarchical, with more- and less-established dealers in larger and smaller spaces mingled throughout. Some booths are like large vitrines; you can see everything from the aisle. Others are like small galleries; you can walk in, browse and admire the furniture, which is sometimes as interesting as the art. If things seem a bit more crowded in the shorter arms of the fair — which is laid out in a giant capital T that you enter at the crossing — they also feel nominally looser and more playful, like an earlier version of the fair.

The attraction of any art fair is that many kinds of art all talk at once, randomly, democratically, in a relatively direct way, unedited by museum curators, magazine editors, international exhibition commissioners or even art critics. Still, it is possible to string together different conversations. One concerns the persistence of painting or paintinglike surfaces, something that few museums seem willing to broach these days. If you want to call this market-driven, fine. Paintings are portable and salable. But, like the novel or the love song, the medium is also wonderfully mutable and susceptible to physical, emotional and symbolic variation.

At Galerie nächst St. Stephan, the different concepts of painting all but come to blows, what with Imi Knoebel’s update of Russian Suprematism in beams of bright, anodized aluminum; Adrian Schiess’s wall-size, iridescent, lyrical abstraction (based on a photograph and printed by ink-jet); Helmut Federle’s wispy little abstractions, the result of time spent in Japan; and Adam Adach’s rough rendering of trash compactors hanging on a wall covered with newspaper front pages from around the world, each neatly shorn of images. Bjarne Melgaard’s parody of Neo-Expressionism snarls forth from several booths, while Jonathan Meese’s equally satirical version — more colorful than usual — chews up the carpet at Contemporary Fine Arts.

At Modern Institute, Anselm Reyle, Cathy Wilkes, Katja Strunz, Jim Lambie and Victoria Morton pursue different pictorial languages, from flat to sculptural, on the wall, on the floor and free-standing. (For more free-standing color, try Meschac Gaba's knit hats as architectural models at Michael Stevenson, and, at Jack Shainman, Jonathan Seliger's towering rendition of an Hermès shopping bag in car enamel on aluminum.) At Canada, Joe Bradley presents the fair's most stripped-down, to-the-point painting: four panels of unpainted beige vinyl titled "Bread."

At Blum & Poe, Chiho Aoshima abandons her usual high-gloss surfaces to create a soft, cartoony, urban wrap-around mural on paper, melding photography and digital manipulation with clouds as old as Japanese screens. At Patrick Painter, Ivan Morley reiterates a mildly Abstract Expressionist composition (middle-period Guston) with thread, while Tim Berresheim uses ink-jet to print a frazzled, linear, computer-derived motif on wood. At Rivington Arms, John Finneran is painting stacks of things like trash cans and free-floating lips on metal with panache and humor, conjuring a cameraless Warhol.

The nonpainting conversation is, of course, vociferous. At Bellwether, Daphne Fitzpatrick's raw-wood ramp and gigantic copper-lined shoe create their own strange world, aided by Anne Hardy's ambitious set-up photograph and Chihcheng Peng's "Shadow Your Man," a series of hilarious digital variations on a short sequence from [Buster Keaton's](#) "Sherlock Jr.," in which shoes figure prominently.

At Murray Guy, a dozen large images by the German photographer Barbara Probst show the same woman photographed at the same instant from all angles, stretching one second into three-dimensional space, like Cubism.

The galleries of Foxy Production and Marc Foxx have landed across the aisle from each other with large, competing sculptures by Sterling Ruby in vandalized white Formica.

Another conversation concerns one-person shows. Some are little retrospectives, like the surveys of Eleanor Antin (Ronald Feldman), Adrian Piper (Elizabeth Dee), Martin Creed (Hauser & Wirth) and Jenny Holzer (Cheim & Read).

Other solos feature new, unfamiliar names. One of the best is at Hotel, a London gallery, which has devoted its small, black-walled booth to the elegantly goth paintings and also the sculptures of Michael Bauer.

Also outstanding is Eigen & Art's presentation of Maix Mayer, an artist from Leipzig, Germany, who, unbelievably, is not a painter. Mr. Mayer's subject is the failure of the future, recounted in photographs of derelict modernist buildings in Taiwan and the former East Germany and in short films shot in and around them. The booth is covered with wallpaper in patterns based on these

structures, creating a total environment in which banality and tragedy conspire.

Nearby, at the Derek Eller booth, the manic master draftsman Dominic McGill also meditates on modernism past and future, while adding collage to his arsenal in “Moloch.” In this enormous, new, volcanic drawing-collage, the words of Baudrillard, Santayana, [George W. Bush](#) and many others collide and combust around a fiery newsreel-like cluster of magazine images, all red. Their shape is based on the flailing monster at the center of Max Ernst’s “Fireside Angel,” which was inspired by the rise of Franco. Mr. McGill has mustered a commensurately apocalyptic tone. He makes the end seem near, and for much more than just art fairs.

Here is information about the art shows this weekend in Manhattan. Unless noted, all run through Sunday.

THE ARMORY SHOW, Pier 94, 12th Avenue at 55th Street, Clinton; [thearmoryshow.com](#).

BRIDGE ART FAIR, New York 2008: the Waterfront, 269 11th Avenue, near 27th Street, ; [bridgeartfair.com](#).

DIGITAL AND VIDEO ART FAIR, (DiVA) 2008 New York, White Box, 525 West 26th Street, Chelsea, and in shipping containers throughout the West Chelsea gallery district, 20th to 26th Streets, between 10th and 11th Avenues. (212) 604-0519; [divafair.com](#).

LA ART IN NY, Altman Building, 135 West 18th Street; [laartfair.com](#).

NEW YORK ART AND DESIGN FAIR, Park Avenue Armory, Park Avenue at 67th Street; [www.newyorkdesignfair.com](#). Through Monday.

POOL ART FAIR, “Meet Me Here,” Hotel Chelsea, 222 West 23rd Street; [poolartfair.com](#).

PULSE ART FAIR NEW YORK, Pier 40, 353 West Street, West Village; [pulse-art.com](#).

RED DOT NEW YORK CITY, Park South Hotel, 122 East 28th Street; [reddotfair.com](#).

SCOPE NEW YORK, Scope Pavilion, [Lincoln Center](#), Damrosch Park, 62nd Street and 10th Avenue; [scope-art.com](#).

VOLTA NY, 7 West 34th Street, (646) 641-8732; [voltashow.com](#).

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While we've all heard stories of artists taking their celebrity status too far by making unusual requests to feel accommodated by their venues, Diplo's latest list of demands for his December 30 show at Pier 94 in Manhattan may be the best you've heard to date. Including items such as a gorilla, an orphan from Malawi and a talking parrot, Diplo sent a rider to the venue with a list that included the following items and demands: A gorilla (Silverback is preferred, an orangutan is also acceptable), one Malawi orphan, one parrot that is trained to say [Diplo's] name, one arranged marriage, on Contact Us. At Piers 92/94, we are committed to serving our friends and neighbors. Your input is greatly appreciated! If you would like to host an event at Piers 92/94, contact Jenniel Davis at [jdavis@mmart.com](mailto:jdavis@mmart.com). To schedule a site visit please contact Lucy Adorno at [ladorno@mmart.com](mailto:ladorno@mmart.com). General Inquiries. Piers 92/94. 711 12th Avenue (55th Street & the West Side Highway) New York NY 10019. The safe also comes with two emergency override keys that ensure you do not lose access to your items--even if you forget the passcode. And thanks to its adjustable storage shelf, key rack, and door pocket, the safe makes it easy to organize your valuables. Ready-Seal safe protects valuables from fire, water, and theft even when bolted down 0.94-cubic foot capacity offers plenty of storage space for files, electronics, and more Fire-resistant design withstands temperatures of up to 1700 degrees F for up to 1 hour Waterproof seal keeps contents dry even when safe is submerged Pry-proof