

A Fine Armory Show Signals a Return to Normal Life

By BRIAN T. ALLEN | September 16, 2021 6:30 AM



Josiah McElheny, *A Twilight Labyrinth (Distillation)*, 2020.

Handblown mirrored glass, transparent and low-iron industrial mirror, blue mirror, oak, blue dye and stain, electric lighting, hardware, architectural intervention made of sheet rock, metal studs, plaster and latex paint. 24 x 31 1/2 x 24 in., 61 x 80 x 61 cm. (Photo courtesy of James

Cohan Gallery)

It's well organized, but blustery, gaudy art doesn't fit the state of the world.

Listen to this article



NRPLUS
MEMBER
ARTICLE

I HAD a long, happy visit to the Armory Show in New York last Friday. It's the

first in-person art fair I've attended in New York — or anywhere — since late February 2020, when I spent a few hours at, coincidentally, the **Armory Show**. I wrote about it at the time. The Chinese coronavirus had just reached America, Purell was aplenty, people were nervous but at the anxious-giggle stage. The show went on, with dealers from Hong Kong, Tehran, and a hundred other places. Schools were open, workers worked in places called offices, the federal debt was \$5 trillion less, and the hegemony of Dr. Pinocchio and the COVID Kooks was of the stuff not even science fiction could conceive.

That was then. First of all, the Armory Show I just visited was the best organized, most spacious, and most comfortable art fair I can remember. The Javits Center, so out-of-the-way that it seems a Jersey encroachment, was transformed, and magic must have been involved, into an elegant setting.



The fair's staff, mostly young people, blended courtesy, good humor, and intelligence. I think dealers and fair goers were possessed of a subtle, supple joy, relieved to have survived and pleased to see and be seen. Even the light sparkled. I went in the morning, so the place wasn't packed. I found no one obnoxious.

There were 157 in-the-flesh exhibitors and another 50 online. In writing this, I read my notes, mostly bits to toggle my memory. "All that zigzag crap," "the pits, a big floaty thing," "ugliest thing ever," "head, shards, hideous," "oy, vey, green and blue blob thing," and then, "finally, A SEASCAPE," followed by a parade of exclamation points.

At that point, I remember feeling like Lawrence of Arabia after he crossed the desert in the movie, blinded not by sun but by a surfeit of bright, bold, relentless color. "He was raised in an anti-imperialist household," I heard a dealer say about a work of art, which, I think, means something more dogmatic than "no one ever hogged the bathroom."

This year's show was about the same size as past Armory Shows, but it was less diffuse,

less discordant. There was lots of color, lots of figures, lots of big. I don't like loud, ugly things, but, putting my taste aside, dealers seemed to offer decorative wall fillers, homage to bromides about race, and lots of the obvious. There were plenty of single-artist booths. I like this, and the organizers encourage this since it offers platforms to show artists in depth. In walking through many of these booths, I found that it's easy to cross the line between good and bad.



Left: Stephanie Temma Hier, *Salute to a Switchblade*, 2021. Oil on linen with glazed stoneware sculpture. 180.5 x 150 x 12.5 cm., 71 x 59 x 5 in.

Right: Stephanie Temma Hier, *Nothing but Delirium*, 2021. Oil on linen with glazed stoneware sculpture. 152.5 x 122 x 25.5 cm., 60 x 48 x 10 in. (Photos courtesy of Bradley Ertaskiran Gallery)

Stephanie Temma Hier is a very fine artist who combines ceramics and painting. She's based in New York and represented by Bradley Ertaskiran from Montreal. She makes beautiful, intricate ceramic forms, sometimes food, sometimes garments, and creates a frame from them in which nestles a

startlingly good trompe l'oeil painting. She uses a Play-Doh palette. *Looking at Salute to a Switchblade*, I thought, “This is different, intriguing, and attractive.” Her glazes are gorgeous.

When I looked at *Nothing but Delirium*, I thought, “How easily fun becomes dumb.” Both are \$20,000, and both combine process and kitsch art, but one pushes the point to shtick. I’m not against escapism, and these are times where everyone finds an escape hatch tempting, but art about process easily becomes insider baseball, and art based on kitsch becomes silly.

Rachel Lee Hovnanian’s big light sculpture *BTWITTAILWY*, from 2016, at Leila Heller Gallery is silly. The piece reads I THINK I AM IN LOVE WITH YOU in neon light. She explores “notions of narcissism, obsession, and intimacy,” and those are deep themes, but I don’t think this piece has much depth. Jenny Holzer spawned 40 years’ worth of this stuff. I don’t think any of it, starting with Holzer, is very good art. Deborah Kass’s 72-by-72-inch acrylic and neon *Don’t Stop*, at Kavi Gupta, is illuminated wallpaper. It reads DON’T STOP in letters big enough to cover the canvas. That’s it. Kass says she creates “empowering, feminist images of females from art history and popular culture.” She

questions “how art and the history of art create power.” She bandies clichés.

Nearly everything in Carl Kostyál’s booth sold. He’s based in London and Stockholm. I’m not against success, and I know London’s damp and gray and Stockholm’s cold gray and Francesca Facciola’s *Fifth Element of Heroism* is what I call hot art. It’s big, lush, and trippy. She’s an obsessively good painter. Her work’s 21st-century Magic Realism. It blurs the line between fantasy and realism and is an offshoot of Surrealism. Think de Chirico or Dali or, in America, Paul Cadmus or George Tooker.

There’s a point, though, where big, lush, and trippy are all about nothing more than big, lush, and trippy. Magic Realism works when it evokes dreams, which are individual — human-scale and intimate and not mass-audience things. They suggest what we’d see in a crystal ball, not a billboard.

I don’t like singling out these artists but, goodness, in high culture there’s some room for goofiness — it’s American art, after all — but not much. Escapism is nice, as long as it’s not a dead end.



Ulrike Theusner, *The Wanderer (Great achievement)*,
2021. Pastel chalk on paper. 68.6 x 42 cm. (Courtesy of
Galerie EIGEN + ART, Leipzig/Berlin)

One of the first booths I visited was Eigen + Art's. They're one of three German dealers in the show, and they and their other international colleagues made it, and it wasn't easy. The federal government has barred most foreigners from the United States, and even those who fit the exemptions find it complicated unless, that is, they're unemployed, unskilled, who-knows-who-they-are, COVID or no, illegals who get the "come on in" test. I loved Ulrike Theusner's small, vibrant pastels of demons, masked men and women, and landscapes, in lurid colors and with pigment applied in streaks that look like lots of scissors. A bit of Blake, a bit of Goya, a bit of Dix, and, presto, they look very of our time. She's German. Theusner's brilliant at scale. Her work's small, conveying angst in miniature and more potent because of it. Technically, her

work's very, very good. It runs around \$6,000. That's the best deal in the show.



Kambui Olujimi, *Late Stage Love Affairs*, 2021.
Watercolor on paper. 40.75 x 44.5 in., 103.5 x 113 cm.;
45 x 48.75 in., 114.3 x 123.8 cm. framed. AZ#2066.
\$20,000.00. (Courtesy of the artist and Anna Zorina Gallery, New York
City)

Kambui Olujimi's *Late Stage Love Affairs* at the Anna Zorina Gallery depicts a hooded figure seated and robed in a dark hellscape, flames in the foreground nipping at his feet, and a small, shrouded figure to the side. Yes, I thought . . . late-stage love affairs, when passion's not spent but poisoned, every minute's a slow burn, and is death the only way to cure the disease once called a true love? I know the feeling. It's a watercolor, though Olujimi does other things. He lives in Brooklyn. I think he's very talented. It's \$20,000 and worth it. Zorina's booth was packed with quality.



Left: Cunningham, Bill, 1929–2016. *Untitled*, New York City, c. 1980s. Gelatin silver print, printed c. 1980s. 10 x 8 in., 25.4 x 20.3 cm. BCU-00129-SP. \$6,000. Provenance: The Bill Cunningham Foundation.

Right: Cunningham, Bill, 1929–2016, *Untitled*, New York City, c. 1970–1980s. Gelatin silver print, printed c. 1970–1980s. 10 x 8 in., 25.4 x 20.3 cm. 8/4/2021. BCU-00172-SP. \$6,000. Provenance: The Bill Cunningham Foundation (Photos courtesy of Bruce Davidson Gallery)

The biggest and most delightful surprise for me was Bruce Silverstein Gallery's group of photographs by Bill Cunningham.

Cunningham, who died in 2016, was the fashion photographer whose *On the Street* and *Evening Hours* column and photographs were, in my opinion, the most beloved feature of the *New York Times* on Sunday. Cunningham, a flaneur and the only paparazzi the well-heeled chased, had the two columns from 1989 until his death. Cunningham took thousands of photographs. The selection he ran every

week, over almost 30 years, make an off-beat, incisive, and fun fashion history as well as a record of New York's essential buoyancy and flair. On the Street showed the fashion sense, sometimes quirky, of Everyman and Everywoman.

Silverstein had a nice selection, mostly from the '70s and '80s, when Cunningham worked for lots of publications and was photographing for his own pleasure. Some are posed but most are spontaneous and have the spirit of his *New York Times* work. I think they're very good art and am surprised so many curators think they're not art at all but documentation. I'll write a story on Cunningham's work. It's a thicket. I'll add that if photography curators were confronted with on-the-spot photographs of people in, say, 1880s Paris, they wouldn't call them documentation. They'd give their firstborn to have them.

The vintage, often unique prints at Silverstein run from \$6,000 to \$10,000.



Amy Cutler, *Transference*, 2020. Gouache on paper. 21-
3/8 x 21-1/2 in., 54 1/4 x 54 1/2 cm. (sheet); 30 1/4 x 28
3/4 in., 77 x 73 cm. framed. (© Amy Cutler. Courtesy of Leslie
Tonkonow Artworks + Projects)

I always try to find Amy Cutler's work. Leslie Tonkonow's booth is devoted to it. Cutler is a master at gouache, watercolor, and drawing and specializes in women in enigmatic, often bizarre situations that look sweet but might very well raise the neck hairs if we knew what was happening, which we never do. She takes us to a folksy Twilight Zone. They are intricate but not dense and at first look like chinoiserie wallpaper but with something creepy beneath the languor and charm. The things I saw were 21-by-21 inches, a nice size, and priced between \$25,000 and \$75,000. Good art has to start with a high standard of craftsmanship, which Cutler has, and a vision, and hers is piquant, with an extra dash.



Gareth Nyandoro, *Blue Smoke*, 2021. Signed and dated verso: Gareth Nyandoro / 2021 / Blue Smoke. Ink on cut paper mounted on panel, with artist's frame. 41 x 27 1/2 in., 104.1 x 69.8 cm. (GNY 35). (Photo courtesy of Van Doran and Waxter Gallery)

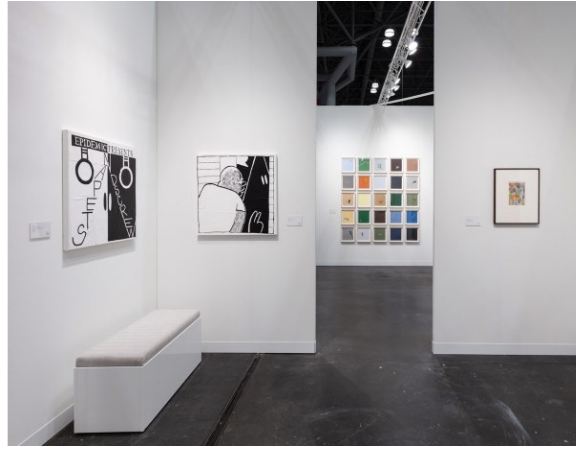
Van Doran Waxner is one of the chi-chi dealers who always delivers quality with no show-business glitz or conglomerate force. They represent, among others, the Diebenkorn Foundation, the late and much esteemed Jackie Saccoccio, TM Davy, and Gareth Nyandoro, an artist from Zimbabwe I'd call young. He's 39. His work is a frenetic mix of ink, collage, and paint that looks improvised but, I imagine, is structured and deliberate. As a starter, he makes small cuts in a canvas and then sponges the lines with ink that bleeds across the picture plane. I've never seen this before. The results are otherworldly scenes of everyday life. *Blue Smoke* is \$13,500. He's as good as Brandon Landers, the young Sacramento artist in the *Made in LA exhibition* I reviewed a few weeks ago.



View of Saradipour Art's booth in the Armory Show devoted to the work of Moslem Khezri. (Photo courtesy of Saradipour Art)

Moslem Khezri is another discovery. He's a young Iranian artist based in Tehran whose work filled Saradipour's booth. Khezri painted a series called "We Keep Reviewing," monochromatic scenes of the classrooms of a boy's school. They're mundane scenes but hypnotic, so familiar and harmonious but so dreamy and bittersweet. They're beautifully painted, too, with quiet light and each gesture and figure alive but alive in the past. Eakins did this, and so did Eastman Johnson.

James Cohan's booth was balanced, sleek, and crisp as well as very satisfying. I can't say it's the best since I think I visited his place after I'd had my eyes bombarded with one too many pieces of loud, brash trivia. He offered surprise and depth as well as a mix of artists, scales, and looks combined with class and taste.



View of James Cohan Gallery booth at the Armory Show. (Photo courtesy of James Cohan Gallery)

Josiah McElheny, one of Cohan's artists, is a skilled glassblower whose *Twilight Labyrinth (Distillation)*, from 2020, is hand-blown mirrored glass, an industrial, low iron mirror, and a blue mirror juxtaposed against each other with what he calls "an architectural intervention made of sheet rock, studs, plaster, and paint. "I'm a person who's interested in too many things," McElheny says in a video on Cohan's website. It's a still-life nocturne that isn't painted but made of glass and has labyrinthine, infinite depth. I don't understand it, but it's gorgeous and it's \$125,000.

Work by Grace Weaver, Fred Tomaselli, the estimable colorist Spencer Finch, the textile artist Yinka Shonibare, and the marquetry artist Alison Elizabeth Taylor make Cohan's booth a mix of unexpected media and a mini

museum. Each object provoked me to keep looking and keep thinking. Each challenged me to tease it out, all the while having a full quiver and demanding I return and look and think more.



BRIAN T. ALLEN is NATIONAL REVIEW's art critic.

RECOMMENDED



Why Don't We Tell Women What's Making Them Miserable?

CARRIE GRESS



Justice Kavanaugh Refuses to Buckle

RAMESH PONNURU



The Real Biden Presidency Emerges

RICH LOWRY



Australians Are Suffering from Excessive COVID Lockdowns

GIDEON ROZNER



Why Isn't the Attack on Larry Elder the Biggest Story in America?

KYLE SMITH



When a Western Society Goes Insane

RICH LOWRY

THE LATEST



**Durham Grand Jury
Indicts Clinton-
Linked Attorney
Involved in Russia
Probe**

CAROLINE DOWNEY



**Thousands of
Migrants Camp
Under Texas Bridge
as Border Patrol
'Overwhelmed'**

ZACHARY EVANS



**Pelosi:
U.S.
Must
Work
with
China on
'Overriding'
Climate
Issue
Despite
Uyghur
'Genocide'**

CAROLINE
DOWNEY



**Gun-
Control
Laws
Aren't
about
Preventing
'Crimes'**

KEVIN D.
WILLIAMSON



**Federal
Judge
Blocks
Biden
Administration
from
Expelling
Migrants
under
COVID
Public
Health
Order**

ZACHARY
EVANS



**Crime:
An
Introduction**

RICH LOWRY