

## The Art Show at Park Avenue Armory Returns to a Sparse Audience

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by Jasmine Liu November 4, 2022



Ricardo Brey's recent work uses exclusively blue, a symbol of freedom during a time of isolation.

Who visits the Art Show at Park Avenue Armory — the Art Dealers Association of America (ADAA)'s annual fair? On Thursday night, the apparent answer was a thin crowd of dealers, collectors, artists, gallerists, and their family members and spouses. It brought to mind a truism I recently heard a gallerist make that “the New York City art world's dirty little secret is that it's one of the most provincial scenes in the world” — a crying shame, because there was some phenomenal art on view, curated and exhibited in a way that was refreshingly pleasant and exciting.

A record number of exhibitors are at the fair this year, 78, with a record number of solo presentations at 55. Despite this, virtually everyone remarked on how quiet the fair was, with some reveling in this fact and others casting it plainly as a failure.

Randall and Ryan Hixenbaugh, brothers and an antiques dealer and painter respectively, seemed disappointed with the atmosphere. “There should definitely be more booze here — and some ecstasy,” Randall said. “It's part of the art world: partying and having fun.”

They speculated that the poor attendance could have something to do with ADAA's switch from the spring to the fall, which first took place last year. “There's been a lot of activity in the auction market that might be keeping collectors away from making direct purchases from galleries,” they also pointed out, referencing the upcoming **auction** of Paul Allen's expansive collection.

“If I was a dealer exhibiting right now, I wouldn't be too excited about this,” Randall said.

David Sheldon, an artist who identified himself as a “lifer” at ADAA’s show, has consistently returned for over two decades. He attends to “be inspired” and “get ideas” and never buys. Standing before a table displaying sculptural assemblages of found materials by Cuban artist Ricardo Brey, Sheldon looked spellbound. “There are moments when I look at something and I think, ‘I can do that. I’ve done that.’ I look at this, and I know: I could never do it.”

Melancholically, he added: “I wish I could.”

Comparing the ADAA’s fair to other ones, he pointed out the obvious: that “it’s not quite as garish.”

“Obviously, there are buckets of champagne going around,” he requisitely noted as a cart wheeled by, “but it’s not a splash.” Indeed, for the duration of the evening, fair workers making the rounds with trolleys of boxed water and chilled champagne seemed more to be offering life support to bored-looking gallerists and assistants than a good time. Several opted for the boxed water.

But Sheldon personally enjoyed the tranquility of the event, and so did I; this weekend, at the Park Avenue Armory, it’s actually possible to formulate some opinions about modern and contemporary art, to be taken by surprise by unfamiliar artists while appreciating long-loved ones too. James Cohan’s collection of ceramic sculptures by Toshiko Takaezu; Tina Kim’s display of the magnificently lively stuffed collage works of late Philippine painter Pacita Abad; and James Fuentes’s exhibit of paintings by Geoffrey Holder were among the highlights.

The tragic reality of art fairs is that any works sold are typically swallowed up in private collections, never to be seen again by the public. At Tina Kim’s booth, Ami Sheppe, associate director of the gallery, said that one painting in Abad’s Asian Abstractions series had already been swapped out because a Museum of Modern Art trustee had snatched it up on opening night. Despite her “big night” from the evening prior, we commiserated about the sadness of it all.

An older woman named Arlene Marc, who had also been at opening night, returned for a second night with the standout outfit of the evening — a checkered green-and-white blazer paired with green-and-white patterned pants; sunglasses, despite the dim ambiance of the Park Avenue Armory; and a Dior hat embellished with crafted floral pieces. I complimented her ensemble, and she immediately pulled up a photo for what she would wear to the Brooklyn Museum’s Thierry Mugler opening: a structured metallic-gray dress, “Mugler-type earrings,” and thigh-high boots with giant buckles. “I needed to get that statement Mugler look,” she said.

Marc is a veteran of art fairs; as we browsed, two younger gallerists noted that she attends every single fair. Marc introduced me to several of her contacts and was eager to provide me with life advice. “Everything is all about positioning oneself and networking. No one’s going to come knocking at your door,” she instructs. “You’ve got to pound the pavement, have face time, and show yourself and be present — be in their face.” She said she had her eye on two works in particular: a miniature Frida Kahlo still life of prickly pears and a Vivian Maier photograph of a veiled urban woman.

While some saw the sparse attendance at the fair as a flop, others, such as Nina Levent, CEO of SAPAR Contemporary, said the pared-down nature of ADAA is the point. “I’m a big supporter of manageable fairs that combat visual fatigue. It’s a fair that’s been edited down, in an age of complete visual overload,” Levent said.

Loud and overwhelming fairs, she says, lead to exhaustion not conducive to processing art. “Halfway through the fair, you don’t know if the work is good or bad or if you’re just so tired that your brain is screaming.” Thankfully, ADAA isn’t one of those fairs, she says.