

THE RETURN OF THE ART FAIR

By Peter Schjeldahl



"En même temps (At the same Time)," an installation by Annette Messenger, at Marian Goodman's booth. Art work courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery

I quite enjoyed Frieze New York, the recent edition of the annual (except last year) international art fair, housed at the Shed—the arts complex in Hudson Yards, on Manhattan's far West Side—rather than, as in past years, inside a colossal tent on Randall's Island. This was unusual for me, because I hate art fairs: they strike me as upscale bazaars, almost immediately exhausting, that reek of quiet desperation. They are a global phenomenon of the last quarter century, born partly out of the competition that dealers face from auction houses, which have recognized—and juiced—the skyrocketing prices of works that may be more or less fresh from studios. Brick-and-mortar galleries can no longer count on preëminence as the farm system of the art industry. To retain top artists and to preserve their own rank in the art world's marching order, dealers can't not laboriously and expensively schlep their wares and staff around the globe, from fair to fair. The events are schmoozefests for the über-rich and assorted influencers, granted V.I.P. privileges. (Such an ugly term, unctuously elevating an élite to an elect.) But they are popular with some upper-middle hoi polloi as well. Tickets to the Shed sold out well in advance, with general-admission and preview tickets ranging from fifty-five to two hundred and sixty-five dollars a pop. How much is exposure to a hodgepodge of recent art worth to you?

For me, three things made this late-pandemic Frieze a tonic. First was the joy of seeing art in person after fourteen months of nearly total deprivation. It was like being given back a body to go with digital-wearied eyeballs. Even so-so works gladdened me just by being real. Second, only about sixty galleries were represented, as opposed to Frieze's usual coma-inducing tally of a couple of hundred. Finally, there was the relative anonymity bestowed by face masks, which had the effect of reducing instances of unsought conversation. Fairs

intensify the social rites that attend the showing and selling of art in New York. My mask could hide my chagrin at failing to recognize people who did address me. (“Good to see you” goes only so far.) Not that these are important disgraces, given my temperamental distance from a wholly commercial ecosystem. I cherish the art world for its steady provision of things to look at—and I respect dealers, who wouldn’t be involved in art if they didn’t love it, and who have the wisest heads in the game, because they can’t afford to be uninformed—but I quail at considering the enterprise a club of mutual interests, least of all in the rise and fall of pecuniary fortunes. The cage matches of Eros and Mammon that are fairs leave me dyspeptic, even as I avail myself of a generously supplied V.I.P. pass because wouldn’t you?

The chief distinction of Frieze New York is that it happened at all, unlike the other fairs that usually invade the city this time of year. In terms of the art on display, it was mild to nearly sedate. Dealers seemed reluctant to lead with their best or most challenging stuff, perhaps keeping their powder dry for occasions attracting, as this one largely didn’t, the European and Asian collectors who would usually walk the floor. (They were still able to fatten the contemporary trade through the fair’s online viewing rooms.) Alert to the present era in racial politics, Frieze paid tribute to the Vision & Justice Project, a program initiated by the Harvard professor Sarah Elizabeth Lewis, in 2016. Billboard-size polemical wall pieces by artists like Carrie Mae Weems, Mel Chin, and Hank Willis Thomas lined the fair’s halls, to uneven effect. The gesture felt defensive, as a virtuous fig leaf on the fair’s naked avarice.

At the booths, numerous Black artists scored higher, given that so many of them—such as the painters Rashid Johnson, at Hauser & Wirth, with bristling, peculiarly nerve-racked abstraction, and Trenton Doyle Hancock, with a solo show at James Cohan, of cartoonish characters, rendered mostly in white on black, that included a wry reference to the ever-controversial K.K.K. imagery in paintings by Philip Guston—are superb. (Speaking of Guston, a K.K.K.-free gouache sketch by him of an open book, at Hauser & Wirth, sparked consciousness of his immense, undying influence on younger artists.) The quality of the artists’ work was in synch with their dealers’ eagerness to peddle it. There is just no getting around the art world’s alchemy of value becoming price—which I would simply prefer to happen offstage, like murder in Greek theatre.

Painting ruled this Frieze. The appetites that govern today’s market explain the flourishing of the old medium, which avant-gardists have declared dead, off and on, for a hundred years. I had an uncanny sense of styles and reputations picking up where they left off in March, 2020. (A visitor this year might have had giddy moments of imagining that the horrendous intervening epoch never happened—fake news.) The dominant mode splits differences between antic figuration and formal order. Surrealism is back, with housebroken manners. The present master is Dana Schutz, whose blazingly colored fantasies of enigmatic violence were on show at David Zwirner’s booth. She makes sculpture, too, of rousingly bestial grotesqueries. (Schutz naïvely got into public trouble at the 2017 Whitney Biennial with a presumptuous painting based on the mutilated Emmett Till in his casket. She has since eschewed obvious topicality.) Related younger painters (Schutz is forty-four) included Ivy Haldeman, with Downs & Ross, who composes images of bizarrely animate fashionable clothes and occasional body parts, writhing in space. Narrative? Abstract? Either or both, in key with the present premium on supercharged ambiguity.

A bonus of the fair was a gorgeous mini-retrospective of the fey romanticist Karen Kilimnik—assembled by Galerie Eva Presenhuber and Sprüth Magers—of small, loosely daubed pastiches of vaguely seventeenth- or eighteenth-century pastoral scenes, rosy-cheeked women, and lovable animals, mostly horses. A world of her own, which some disdain but I adore. Since the nineteen-eighties, when Kilimnik made many of the paintings,

she has conveyed a quality ever rarer in contemporary art: the expatiation of a personal drive. You feel that she would be making the work if she were the only artist in existence, which, in her heart, she may well be. Similarly take-me-home covetable, at Karma, was a small still-life by Dike Blair, an artist who is little renowned but is passionately esteemed by his fans, including me. Blair has taken various tacks since the seventies, most successfully photo-realist paintings in gouache or oil (from snapshots he takes) of unremarkable domestic and worldly objects and bits of architecture. Flowers feature often. So do fancy cocktails, as at Frieze. Blair's compositions are deadpan and his colors emphatic. A subtle air of ironic detachment pervades his work, as if he were startled by his own temerity in offering pleasures so unprepossessing. But once you start looking at a picture by him it's hard to stop. You almost watch, rather than look, as though some ultimate secret of life and art were in the offing, momentarily out of sight and not to be missed when it reveals itself.

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But taking the cake in terms of personal aesthetic audacity was "Untitled" (1990), a pale canvas, at Michael Werner, by the late and, by many of us, still lamented German artist Sigmar Polke, who died in 2010, at the age of sixty-nine. He was a wizard of heterodox materials and an unpredictable humorist with mystical nuances. He created this work in the dark with slathered silver nitrate, silver oxide, silver iodide, and silver bromide. Exposed to light, the strokes resolved into a filmy gestural cadenza: quietly ferocious, if such is imaginable, like superimposed eddies in a whipping windstorm. As often during Polke's career, chance was his sidekick. To view this work is to share in his surprise when it became visible. The painting couldn't have been more remote from the fair's pageant of product lines—not that Polke didn't work in series, but he could be counted on for exhilarating instances of turning the tables on himself.

Either several familiar artists have improved lately or my former resistance to them has expired. So it is with the French multimedia specialist Annette Messager, with two installations at Marian Goodman: a large wall hung with scrolls bearing fluent drawings that are interspersed with small individual figures of uncertain species, and a darkened room containing a heap of taxidermied or toy creatures (rabbit, duck, pigeon, kitten, raccoon, lizard, and more) and sculpted hands with raised fingers, all embedded in a sort of primal crud. Tiny spotlights rotated within the pile, casting on the surrounding walls huge shadows of things near the lights and diminutive ones of those more distant. The flow of the scale shifts mesmerized. A poetry of some organic natural process was suggested—perhaps evolution or, I don't know, devolution, on fast forward. The works' theatrical richness provided an immersive time-out from Frieze's teeming thises and thats.

Contemplation, art's primary exercise of the human mind, is the last thing enabled by art-fair hurly-burly. But it could and did occur at points in Frieze New York, an event marked less by celebration than by gasping relief, like a swimmer saved from drowning.