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The New York Times

Frieze New York, a Visual Circus Under the Big Top

By HOLLAND COTTER MAY 5, 2016



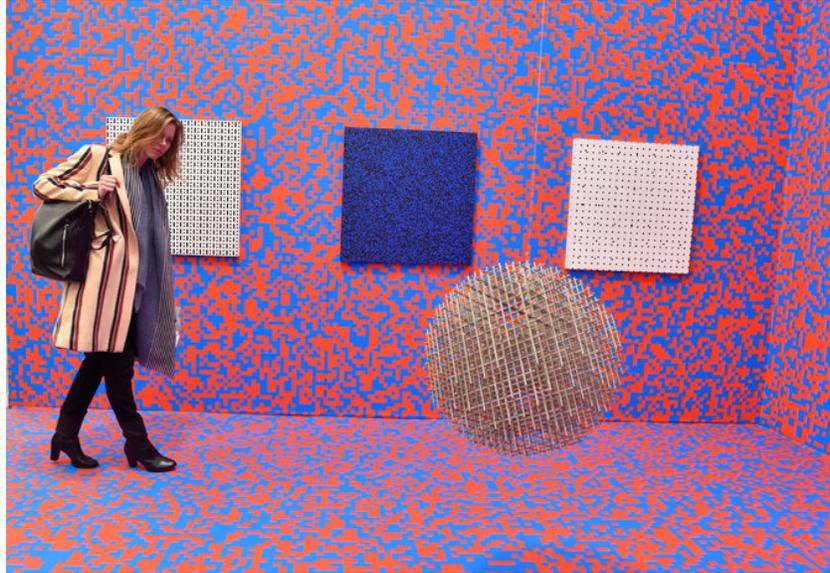
Performers in a piece by Eduardo Navarro, in the foreground, and Alex Da Corte's giant helium-filled baby floating behind them, at the Randalls Island outpost of Frieze New York. CreditPhilip Greenberg for The New York Times

Visitors to Frieze New York, one of the art industry's larger trade shows, housed in a white tent on Randalls Island, are greeted by what could be taken as a new fair branding symbol: a giant, helium-inflated figure of a fat, howling baby with a tiny brainpan and an immense open mouth.

Titled "Free Money," this 25-foot-high outdoor sculpture is the work of the young American artist Alex Da Corte, who has based his career on sending pop culture through the spin cycle. In this case, he appropriates an image from Tim Burton's 1989 "Batman." In the film, to bring out the people of Gotham, the Joker stages a parade with flashy floats, like this one, promising to cap the event with a shower of cash. What the crowds get instead, though, is a fog of poison gas.

This is an apt image for an art fair, even if a fair's only conspicuous killer effect is to raise the world's quotient of junk art and the prices paid for it. Frieze, which originated in London a quarter-century ago, certainly contributes to these spikes, and is geared to an audience that wants to see what it already knows. Its main value lies, however, in shining light on some unfamiliar galleries and in bringing forward art we might not otherwise see.

Absorbing the whole event, which runs through Sunday, requires strategizing, helped somewhat by the fair's organization into several almost manageable parts. Mr. Da Corte's colicky kid, for example, is one of a group of special projects commissioned from individual artists. The more than 200 galleries participating are divided into four broad categories.



The work of Nancy François Morellet at the art fair Frieze New York on Randalls Island. Credit Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

The largest consists of galleries that have been in business long and profitably enough to be able to afford the fair's steep expenses. The smaller "Focus" section is made of galleries established since 2004 and showing work that hasn't previously appeared in an art fair. Under the label "Frame" come relative newbies, galleries eight years old or younger. A section called "Spotlight" offers what passes for history at this fair: solo shows of 20th-century art from the 1960s forward.

There are rewards in all categories. If you're a shopper itchy to lay down some bucks, you may find general inventory displays, with a few things by several artists, most attractive, and there are plenty of these. Some mix this and that, gallery artists with resale items. You'll find plenty of these. Others are artful installations in themselves.

There's a beauty at the New York gallery Salon 94, where Judy Chicago's moody, spray-painted 1983 "EU-22 Earth Birth" is on the same fluid wavelength as a picture by the Sudanese painter Ibrahim el-Salahi, and both gain in sensuality from the contrasting presence of tough pieces by the great Pakistan-born American sculptor Huma Bhabha and the Japanese ceramist Kentaro Kawabata.



Paintings on the wall and supersize nails on the floor, from Galeria Fortes Vilaça in São Paulo, Brazil. Credit Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

Other group shows are less striking for coherence than for including extraordinary individual artists. At Broadway 1602, a downtown New York space recently relocated to Harlem, you'll find two in the American Pop artists Idelle Weber and the Polish sculptor Wanda Czelkowska, both with work from the 1960s. And a four-artist show at Foksal Gallery Foundation, from Warsaw, is particularly interesting for the presence of drawings by Erna Rosenstein (1913-2004), an artist-poet with a rich story and vibrant hand. (She was recently in "Unorthodox" at the Jewish Museum here.)

A wall of wild and dirty little doll-puppets by a Belgian duo, Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys, makes Gavin Brown's Enterprise a destination. And two galleries from Bogotá, Colombia, are well worth tracking down for a glimpse of wonderful artists all but unknown here. Casas Riegner has tiny abstract paintings on woven fabrics by Carlos Rojas (1933-1997) and two figurative paintings by the political artist Beatriz González, subject of an unforgettable 1998 retrospective at El Museo del Barrio and still hard at work in her 80s.



Andrea Rosen Gallery's installation by David Altmejd. Credit Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

A second gallery, Instituto de Visión, with Alberto Baraya, Otto Berchem, Pia Camil and Wilson Díaz, was awarded one of two "Frieze Stand Prizes" this year for its visually and thematically striking mix. A comparable award might have gone to Andrea Rosen Gallery, a staple of New York's Chelsea, which brings together a funky Mika Rottenberg air-conditioner piece; a mirrored installation with coconuts by David Altmejd, a faux hot spring by Hayden Dunham, and all-but-blank paintings by Simon Fujiwara. For some reason it all clicks.

Mr. Fujiwara also has a solo at Taro Nasu, a gallery from Tokyo. As a viewing experience, the one-artist format is particularly satisfying, maybe because it's conducive to concentration. Some such shows, like the Dumpster's-worth of Damien Hirsts at Gagosian, are a drag, but others cast a spell even in a fair's mall-like atmosphere. There's a magnetic example in a multipart installation by David Wojnarowicz at P.P.O.W., made in 1985 and virtually unseen since, just inside one of the fair's two entrances, and another, almost invisibly casual, by a newcomer, Ann Cathrin November Hoibo, at Standard (Oslo), just inside the other one.

In general, solo shows are the way to go. Many combine the fair's least splashy material with the brightest thinking. At Stevenson Gallery from Cape Town, South Africa, there's an invaluable mini-survey of Moshekwa Langa's art, something almost impossible to imagine in almost any New York commercial space, Skoto Gallery in Chelsea being an exception. Similarly, only Aicon Gallery, isolated on a block near the Bowery, is likely to come up with the focused look at the Indian modernist S. H. Raza that it gives us here. Barbara Thumm, from Berlin, brings early paintings by Jo Baer: Who remembers that an artist associated with geometric abstraction, once did, and is now again doing, big, Surrealist-inspired figurative things?



A Mel Edwards work shown by Alexander Gray Associates. Credit Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

The fair's "Spotlight" section provides refresher courses in the careers of Alan Shields (his fabulous early 1970s "Inverted Gumdrop," all painted canvas strips and hippie beads, is at Van Doren Waxter) and in those of two conceptualists, David Ireland (at Anglim Gilbert, San Francisco) and Mary Kelly. Ms. Kelly's work at the Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London, includes a 1974 study for her "Post-Partum Document," a project that examined maternity as a form of labor and caused an uproar by incorporating her child's feces-stained diapers. She remains a linchpin presence in the history of international feminism.

Save London's Parafin gallery for a spell of quiet time with Nancy Holt's exceptionally beautiful and seldom seen 1968 "Western Graveyards" series of photographs. Haunting in a different way are the photographs called "Reconciliation Studies," by Howard Fried at the Box, from Los Angeles. The pictures are all of clothes from Mr. Fried's mother's wardrobe, taken after her death in 2002. The individual items depicted are also for sale as art objects, though with contractual strings attached. For details, talk to the gallery staff, who will be wearing some of the outfits during the fair.

For many New Yorkers, Mr. Fried will be a discovery. Isn't discovery what fairs should be for? Check out the spicy political work of the Mexican painter, performer and book publisher Felipe Ehrenberg, at Baro Galeria, from São Paulo; and the witty kinetic art of Abraham Palatnik at Galeria Nara Roesler, another São Paulo space. Finally, a selection of drawings by Denzil Forrester, at the nonprofit White Columns, is both news and a preview of things to come. Born in Grenada in 1956, Mr. Forrester graduated from the Royal Academy of Art, London, and has been steadily producing large paintings on the theme of reggae dance hall culture. White Columns will organize a New York exhibition of his work in November, but you saw it first here at the fair.

What I've pulled out here is some of what interested me. A lot did not: acres of over-upholstered abstract paintings; fussy machine-tooled sculptures; second-tier auction bait; and tired work by good artists. (William Kentridge, for one, needs a rest.) The blank impression made by new galleries in "Frame" is particularly dispiriting.



At Frieze New York on Randalls Island, Maurizio Cattelan has recreated a work he made in 1994 that includes a chandelier and a live donkey. Credit Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

Mr. Da Corte's gape-mouthed baby captures some of the big emptiness built into the art fair phenomenon. It also manages the currently popular ploy of being at once critical and self-aggrandizing. The master of this game is Maurizio Cattelan, another of the fair's commissioned artists. A while back, he announced that he was retiring but has since been revisiting it. His Frieze project recreates his first New York gallery solo, in 1994, which was also the last show at the SoHo space run by the dealer Daniel Newburg.

For that occasion, Mr. Cattelan installed a chandelier and a live donkey in the gallery, and he has done so again at Frieze. Does this bit of history matter to anyone other than the artist or Mr. Newburg? I doubt it. And what's the piece about: a Goya-like jibe at art world grandiosity and dumbness by someone who has done very well by nibbling away at the hand that feeds him? Whatever, it was of some interest, at the fair's V.I.P. preview, to watch the 1 percent audience that Frieze is custom-designed for, lining up with coffee cups and Champagne flutes and waiting for quite a while to take a look and maybe try to figure it out.

Frieze New York runs through May 8 at Randalls Island Park. Single admission tickets are \$45. Check availability for students and under 25; www.frieze.com.