

Armory Show

Collectors are not deterred by the coronavirus.

The New York art fair for modern and contemporary art is off to a brilliant start with strong sales. All exhibitors are also presenting their work simultaneously on the online platform Artsy.

Barbara Kutscher
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The artist developed a booth-filling installation for the Albertz Benda gallery's stand. Photo: Timothy Curtis, Albertz Benda Gallery, New York

New York. New Yorkers are a very special bunch. Schools are closed, countless events canceled, employees encouraged to work from home. But they apparently won't let that stop them from mingling with fellow collectors. The only thing heard was, "Better not kiss me!" As usual, the aisles of the Armory Show were packed. The VIP day was packed. With 183 exhibitors from 32 countries, it is the flagship event among a handful of trade fairs taking place this long weekend.

Is it perhaps an escape from the bad news? The atmosphere is good, enhanced by bars strategically placed throughout the fair, serving not only elegant champagne but also stronger drinks. “We had no idea what to expect given the coronavirus and the unpredictable markets,” said Lauren Marinaro of the young New York gallery Marinaro, clearly relieved. She is offering wall hangings sewn from airplane blankets by Milanese artist Alessandro Teoldi, priced up to \$15,000.

“It’s going much better than expected,” says William Pym of Josh Lilley Gallery (London), who has sold three-quarters of his stand. “The Armory Show always attracts a wider variety of collectors than other fairs. It’s quite expensive for an exhibitor to come here, but it’s worth it.”

Nicole Berry, a third-year director, also considered collectors whose travel plans were cancelled. At the last minute, she secured the help of the New York-based online platform Artsy, which regularly publishes the show catalog for its subscribers, but this time exceptionally invited all exhibitors of the Armory Show, reportedly free of charge.

In this issue, Berry continued to develop her tried and tested, successful ideas. She was thus able to lure back retailers like Gagosian and Isabella Bortolozzi after a long absence.



The paper work “Untitled (Acephalous series)” uses gouache, pen, acrylic and watercolor paints. The image (detail) dates from 2015.
Photo: Laylah Ali, Gallery Steve Turner

Curated areas break up the monotony of seemingly endless rows of booths on the two piers in the Hudson River. Among seven large-scale installations scattered throughout the fair, the undisputed highlight is the enormous assemblage “The Caddy Court” by Ed & Nancy Kienholz (1986/87). The work is centered around a drivable Cadillac. Composed in 1978, this piece from the LA Louver Gallery in Venice, CA, a then-critical commentary on the US Supreme Court, is available for \$2.5 million.

Another hit was the curated “Focus” sector for emerging artists, which grew to 31 participants at the expense of the modern art exhibitors. Jamillah James, a promising Black curator at the progressive Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in LA, demonstrated a keen sense for what’s trending. Unsurprisingly, she selected many artists from Africa and the diaspora.

Purchase of the private museum

New Image Art Gallery (Los Angeles), for example, is showcasing works by Umar Rashid that present his version of 18th-century colonial history—namely, from the perspective of the oppressed—in fine drawings and textile works. They are expected to cost up to \$18,000.

Jack Bell from London is exhibiting large-format, studio-fresh works by Lavar Munroe of the Bahamas. With their fluid brushstrokes in intense acrylics, combined with spray paint, these works transcend themes of gang culture, drugs, and violence. Prices range from \$30,000 to \$80,000. A private US museum quickly acquired Munroe’s largest work.

Long waiting lists for street art

Steve Turner (Los Angeles), a first-time participant, also quickly sold Jon Key’s family portraits in a few bold colors (up to \$15,000). In contrast, the Chelsea gallery Albertz Benda focused particularly successfully on currently popular street art. Younger collectors, especially those in their 40s, were enthusiastic about the work of Timothy Curtis from Philadelphia. The rising internet star also explores the darker aspects of life. All of his works sold for prices up to \$140,000; and “our waiting list is longer than the East River,” said Thorsten Albertz.

“This fair truly offers something of high quality for everyone,” says New York art consultant Christine Minas. “Beyond trends, such as objects made from textile fibers and fabrics, which are now completely accepted, there really is something for everyone to find here.”

The 26th Armory Show runs until Sunday, March 8, 2020 in New York at Piers 90 and 94 in Manhattan.
