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Art Review

Venerable, Small and Lots on Paper (Including Napkins)

By KAREN ROSENBERG

New York's two biggest art fairs are going double or nothing: The Art Show, the annual exhibition of the Art Dealers Association of America, now coincides with the Armory Show. Expect lots of head scratching and crosstown traffic; the Art Show is at the Park Avenue Armory, while the Armory Show is at Piers 92 and 94.

Last year there were signs that the fairs, separated then by more than a week, were eyeing each other's turf. The Armory Show inaugurated a blue-chip component, Armory Modern, while the Art Show attracted contemporary dealers like Peter Blum and Ronald Feldman.

This year, though, the Art Show is content to do what it does best. The flashy statement pieces of 2009 (for example, Tavares Strachan's chunk of a New Haven city block, at Feldman) have given way to the venerable blue-chip painting of Art Shows past. Who needs novelty when you have an entire booth of de Koonings, from the 1950s through the 1980s (at L&M Arts)?

The contemporary works are almost alarmingly modest, from the petite John McCracken sculptures at David Zwirner to Martin Kippenberger's itty-bitty postcards at David Nolan. Even some artists who normally work on a large scale have downsized: Luhing Augustine has a booth of pint-size works on paper by the German painter Albert Oehlen.

Many dealers brought works on paper this year, perhaps to whet the appetites of new or wary collectors. D'Amelio Terras has an entire booth of drawings by a diverse selection of contemporary artists, including intricate works by Philip Van Aver and John Morris, arranged salon style on lapis blue walls.

You'll have to look hard to find a booth that hasn't been "curated." Among 70 exhibitors there are 26 solo-artist presentations and some 20 "group and thematic exhibitions."

Granted, some of these rubrics are pretty broad: "The Horizon Line in 19th-Century Photographs," at Hans P. Kraus Jr., or "The Painted Body" at Acquavella, for instance. But who cares when you're looking at a dreamy Gustave Le Gray seascape (at Kraus) or Courbet's portrait of a countess (at Acquavella)?

Zabriskie has art from Alfred Stieglitz's "291" gallery and magazine. A charming group show at CRG named "The Language of Flowers," after an essay by Georges Bataille, includes blooms drawn on napkins in ballpoint pen by Jim Hodges.

The solo-artist booths are even stronger, sometimes to the point of seeming like mini-museums. The most riveting is Marsden Hartley at Menconi & Schoelkopf, with detailed biographical wall labels. Of special interest is "Dogtown" (1931), an eerie view of the abandoned Massachusetts village where Mr. Hartley found solace during a period of depression.

Nearby at Peter Freeman's booth, you can see trompe l'oeil Pop paintings by Alex Hay and some video footage from Mr. Hay's performances with Experiments in Art and Technology. It's interesting to think that some of these events took place right at the Armory.

Also worthwhile are Kippenberger's drawings on hotel stationery, at David Nolan, and Alighiero Boetti's embroidered maps and alphabets at Sperone Westwater. And Galerie Lelong fills its booth with a 1996 installation by Nancy Spero, who died last October. Titled "Sheela-Na-Gig at Home," after the Celtic fertility figure, it combines paper dolls and video with a brightly colored array of women's unmentionables hanging from a clothesline.

You won't find a solo booth of Milton Avery, but his semi-abstract landscapes stand out in several places. In "Wild Moon and Sea" (1961), at Knoedler, the lunar orb is ensconced in an oysterlike blob of clouds. D C Moore also has a late Avery, a hypnotic Catskills landscape from 1960.

Living artists have some arresting moments too. Julie Heffernan's ever more ornate self-portraits dazzle at P.P.O.W. The bright geometric abstractions of the 86-year-old painter Shirley Jaffe, at Tibor de Nagy, stand out in a sea of gray. And Fred Wilson at PaceWildenstein continues a project from the 53rd Venice Biennale: baroque mirrors made from opaque black Murano glass and named "Iago's Mirror" for the "Othello" character.

It's not surprising to find Marian Goodman's booth of William Kentridge front and center in the fair layout. All of the work relates to, and augurs well for, his production of Shostakovich's "Nose," opening on Friday at the Metropolitan Opera. Mr. Kentridge also has a survey at the Museum of Modern Art, making him impossible to avoid this week (though you wouldn't want to).

Perhaps taking a cue from the Whitney Biennial, this fair generates a productive confusion of the old and the new. It's not a huge step, physically or conceptually, from the small sculptures of the young Los Angeles artist Matt Johnson at Blum & Poe (a first-time exhibitor) to the Henry Moore maquettes at Lillian Heindenber.

At Michael Werner, Picabia paintings of femmes fatales and a Polke abstraction anchor a sculptural head by Thomas Houseago, the current Whitney Biennial artist. And at Pace/MacGill, Paul Graham's riveting photo sequence of a woman eating fried chicken in New Orleans has some excellent company, in the form of street shots by Robert Frank and Diane Arbus.

No one wants to stand out or take chances, maybe because the Art Show's move to Armory Week is enough of a gamble.

The Art Show runs through Sunday at the Park Avenue Armory, 643 Park Avenue, at 67th Street; artdealers.org.