

The New York Times

Art Fairs, Full of Bling if Not Fire

THIS year the expansion of the art world beyond its traditional boundaries reached new extremes. On many fronts it seemed that the global was winning out over the local, what with the continued proliferation of art fairs, the spread of auctions and the franchising of art galleries, on the Gagosian model, around the globe. And this year it often seemed as if the effects of all this — a combined draining of energy and further stratification of the art world into haves and have-nots — were registering most powerfully in New York, which still has the biggest gallery scene in the world.

The machine driving this expansion — a sparkling sphere of money, shiny art and shiny people — hovers like a giant, top-heavy spaceship above what I consider the serious art world, where real art comes from. You see it when you pick up the equally shiny art magazines. But unless you're one of the players actually involved in buying or selling, it remains remote, a world unto itself. Sometimes it seems as if it could just take off — with all its bling, astounding prices and show-off collectors and climbers — and park in some other part of the art galaxy, there to thrive or collapse of its own accord.

But that's probably not going to happen. The fairs in particular have become an essential fact of the lives and livelihoods of art galleries of all kinds, not just the blue-chip ones catered to by the various Basel and Frieze iterations. Attending several art fairs a year, mainly in the United States and Europe, is now what many galleries do, even the fledgling ones on the Lower East Side. It is how they sell art, make contacts and establish their bona fides with dealers from other cities. But as dealers stretch themselves thinner and thinner, it is inevitable that local art scenes will pay a price.

I felt it this year in the New York galleries, which I love and where I spend an inordinate amount of time. Things seemed to have slowed and quieted down, even before Hurricane Sandy swamped Chelsea. Often there didn't seem to be as many people or as much excitement in the galleries. I often wondered if dealers or artists were hoarding the good stuff for the fairs.

I also thought of a Los Angeles Times article from the summer of 2011 about Margo Leavin, doyenne of the Los Angeles gallery scene, closing her gallery after 40 years. She was doing so, she said, because of the increasing importance of art fairs and what she saw as the decreasing interest in “the gallery show experience.”

At the time it seemed like an embittered parting salvo from someone who had simply decided to retire, but it may characterize a general condition, the shifting of attention and energy. It did not seem coincidental to the sense of things slowing down that some galleries were scheduling longer and therefore fewer shows, mounting only two this fall instead of the usual three or even four.

I found myself walking around a lot this fall thinking that people need to do better. There were too many vacant-looking, phoned-in exhibitions by artists from all over the world, shows that looked like something art dealers were doing to kill time between fairs. And there were moments when galleries seemed to be trying to fight back with immense, festivalist art-fair extravaganzas. These shows included Thomas Hirschhorn at Gladstone, Leonardo Drew at Sikkema Jenkins and Jonah Freeman and Justin Lowe at Marlborough. Their environmental pieces seemed designed, like art fairs, to give you more than you can possibly look at: Let Us Overwhelm You was the guiding principle. (For the most part my socks stayed on.)

Derosia

Roberta Smith, The New York Times, December 13, 2012

There were also some environments that seemed to dissent from or parody such overkill, namely Klara Liden's sardonic show, which crammed the space at Reena Spaulings Fine Art with discarded Christmas trees in January, and, in the fall Sarah Oppenheimer's eye-cleansing torquing of the white cube at P.P.O.W. and Andra Ursuta's show of sculpture and smashed walls and windows (the gallery's) at Ramiken Crucible. And there were other, more routine exceptions throughout the season, mostly involving small galleries and young artists, when you got a sense of the art gallery as vital node of creativity: Jordan Wolfson's astounding video at Alex Zachary/Peter Currie and Hans Schabus's at Simon Preston; Anya Kielar's fey, tapestrylike renderings of women at Rachel Uffner; Whitney Claffin's small, weirdly encrusted paintings at Thomas Erben; and Kerstin Brätsch's see-through glass works at Gavin Brown. There were also nodes of out-and-out resistance, like the rather messy show that Ei Arakawa and Nora Schultz are making up as it goes along now on view at Spaulings (through Jan. 13).

Mind you, I complain about art fairs despite liking them quite a bit, especially if I don't have to leave town to see them. It is not the fairs themselves but the quantity and ubiquity of them that bother me. Because galleries are under a kind of strain; especially the newer ones that are the life's blood of any local art scene. Something somewhere has got to give. I hope it's not on the ground, but in the gleaming spaceship hovering overhead.