

MARTOS GALLERY

## The New York Times

# Homages, Giddy Humor and Less Clutter



The Armory Show at Piers 92 and 94 includes work by Chiyu Uemae at the Whitestone booth at the show. Yasuko Nishimaki visits. Linda Rosier for The New York Times

**By Karen Rosenberg**

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A few months ago, a focus group convened to discuss the 2013 Armory Show. Organized and [videotaped](#) by the fair's official artist, Liz Magic Laser, it engaged art writers, curators, collectors and others in a lively discussion of the flagging Armory brand. It was a clever way of acknowledging things that art-worlders have been complaining about for years: That the Armory had become too big and too corporate under its owners, Merchandise Mart; that it took New York for granted; and, most recently, that it had been dealt a possible death blow by the upstart Frieze art fair.

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Ms. Laser, a performance artist whose work can resemble guerrilla marketing, followed up on some of the group's suggestions. A call for more transparency, for instance, has resulted in tote bags, T-shirts and passes lettered with insider statistics: that the average cost of a booth is \$24,000, for instance, or that 12,365 V.I.P. cards are issued.

And the fair's organizers seem to have been heeding their own focus groups, offering wider aisles, fewer exhibitors, more solo-artist booths and a generally less-cluttered look. "Give them what they want" could be the motto of this year's Armory, right down to the 200 Brillo boxes set up like a supermarket special each day and available free to all takers (a Warhol homage by the artist Charles Lutz).

There's more than a little desperation in this sudden desire to please, as there is in the fair's new partnerships with profit and nonprofit institutions. The start-up Artsy hosted an online preview of the fair, and the director of the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, Eric Shiner, was charged with organizing the Armory's nominally geographic "Focus" section. (Normally devoted to an emerging art market, "Focus" is showcasing the United States this year, which is to say that it's throwing out the map and becoming a curator-driven affair.)

Mr. Shiner has given us a Warhol-inflected look at America that plays a lot like the Metropolitan Museum of Art's fall show "[Regarding Warhol](#)" (which, as it happens, is now at the Warhol Museum). The art is lively, the humor giddy and the layout full of surprises: the small Chelsea gallery Churner & Churner, showing Elise Adibi's twists on Warhol's urine-soaked "oxidation" paintings, sits right next to Gagosian's double-size, all-Warhol booth.

But something feels a bit off, and not just the Met-blockbuster redux or the boundary-blurring of a museum director playing curator at an art fair (and justifying this decision with the old Warholian saw about [art and business](#)).

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Specifically, it's late to be claiming the Pope of Pop as patron saint of art fairs. The [fairs](#), which have multiplied and grown in strength to the point where they exert their own outsize influence on the art world, certainly don't need Warhol's blessing (although Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's, bestowed at the opening ceremony for Armory Arts Week, doesn't hurt).

Also tenuous, if more timely, is the association of this fair with the 1913 Armory Show and its own provocateur, Duchamp. Scattered references include a fully functioning urinal at Pierogi Gallery (courtesy of the artist Andrew Ohanesian); homages to "Nude Descending a Staircase" at Francis M. Naumann; and a booth dedicated to the Swedish artist [Ulf Linde](#), known for his replicas of "The Large Glass" and other major works by Duchamp. Mainly, they serve to remind you how little the current Armory Show has in common with the [original show](#) and how hard it is to rile fairgoers today.

If anything at this Armory can do that, it's probably the duo of Bjarne Melgaard and Sverre Bjertnes's gleefully deranged, stalkerish shrine to Mary Boone at Rod Bianco, with an effigy of Ms. Boone surrounded by piles of crude drawings and her signature Chanel suits mounted on paintings. It outshines many of the fair's tributes to artists, and as a portrait of a tough-talking dealer seems more appropriate to the occasion.

The Melgaard-Bjertnes contribution is just one of many solo-project presentations, which have become more prominent at the Armory and are essential to its continued survival.

Overwhelmingly, they show that artists, and their exhibitors, are getting more savvy and playful about the booth format with every passing year.

Front and center at David Zwirner, for instance, Diana Thater's video walls wrap the corners of the booths in lush, flickering bouquets of purple clematis. At Clearing, Ryan Foerster eschews his usual all-over-the-place installations for a neat row of photographs, the better to emphasize the entropy within the images: They are portraits that turned abstract when hit by Hurricane Sandy's floodwaters at Mr. Foerster's Brighton Beach studio.

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The Noire gallery of Turin, Italy, meanwhile, has mounted a quietly intriguing show of hometown hero Alighiero Boetti, an excellent complement to his current exhibition at [Gladstone Gallery](#) in Chelsea. It includes, alongside his familiar embroidered texts, an unedited Super-8 film made by placing the movie camera on the turntable of a record player.

The solo trend continues over at Pier 92, the wing known as Armory Modern. Here, Whitestone is showing frenetic abstract paintings made with short stitches and stabbing brush strokes by the Gutai artist Chiyu Uemae, and Andrew Edlin has given his entire booth over to Tom Duncan's interactive, mechanical model of Coney Island.

These are exceptions, though, standouts from a glut of colorful but unprepossessing works (mostly by lesser Abstract Expressionist, Pop and Color Field painters). If you look hard enough you can spot a Morandi or two between the Boteros and Wesselmans, but generally this part of the fair feels a bit neglected, left behind in the Armory's frantic drive to rebrand itself.

And yet, on both piers, as at any fair of this size, there is lot of art that is bad and some that is quite good. There are people in every aisle trying to figure out which is which, talking about art, taking and sharing pictures of it, and possibly even putting their money on it. That gathering of the tribes is the ultimate focus group, and it's the only one that really matters.

*A correction was made on March 8, 2013: An earlier version of this review misidentified the nationality of the artist Ulf Linde. He is Swedish, not Swiss.*

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