

ART REVIEW

An Art Fair That Tries to Be Something Else

By Martha Schwendener



Richard Nonas's sculptures from the 1980s rearranged on the floor at McCaffrey at the Independent art fair. Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

In its fifth year, [the Independent](#) continues to assert its maverick identity. It's an art fair that pretends not to be an art fair. And

because it takes place in [Dia Art Foundation](#)'s former exhibition space, you're almost convinced. If fairs are part of the new necessary evil for small galleries to stay afloat, this one offers a good concentrated roundup of artists and exhibitors: nonprofit institutions, alternative spaces along with a few commercial galleries that might be barely paying their bills.

The fair still eschews souklike booths or the gridded cubicles of more corporate art fairs. And the organizers employed two young architects, Andrew Feuerstein and Bret Quagliara, to create a layout inspired by the tangram, a puzzle said to help develop spatial reasoning skills.

The conversation running throughout the fair this year has to do with history. Contemporary art is often accused of recycling and repurposing, and among the more than 50 participating galleries and nonprofits from 14 countries, there is plenty of work that looks old but is actually new, and vice versa.

Among the new work that nods to older models are paintings by [Jessica Warboys](#) at [Gaudel de Stampa](#) from the series "Sea Painting, Dunwich, 2014," on unstretched canvas flowing onto the floor made by soaking the canvas in seawater. The works look like a cross between Abstract Expressionism and the mechanically produced "machine" abstractions of [Pinot Gallizio](#).

At [Labor](#), a Mexico City gallery, [Etienne Chambaud](#) has retooled a

trope made famous by Andy Warhol in his “[Oxidation Paintings](#)”: urine applied to pulverized copper to create dazzling metallic effects. In Mr. Chambaud’s case, the urine is from animals and refers to the Anthropocene or urbanizing human impact on the planet. (The gallery also points out that in Pier Paolo Pasolini’s 1968 film “Teorema,” a character urinates on a painting, which may have provided Warhol with the idea.)

At [Gavin Brown](#), [Jennifer Bornstein](#)’s rubbings made with wax and oil pastels are strongly reminiscent of the [frottage](#) technique employed by Max Ernst and the Surrealists. Most of Ms. Bornstein’s were made on site and include objects like [Joseph Beuys](#)’s “[7000 Oaks](#),” squat basalt columns that line 22nd Street (also a Dia-sponsored legacy).

A tabletop display by the Czech artist [Eva Kotatkova](#) at [Meyer Riegger](#) recalls [Hannah Hoch](#)’s photomontages except that Ms. Kotatkova’s images, cut from Communist-era books, have been fashioned into an accordion-pleated book. At [Untitled](#), [Brad Troemel](#)’s panels with objects vacuum sealed into them hark back to ’80s bedroom bulletin-board collages, although these won’t be on view for long. Mr. Troemel sells his work on the website [Etsy](#), where people “around the world connect to buy and sell unique goods” (just like art fairs).

Nostalgia is also a boon for older (or dead) artists whose work look remarkably fresh. [Rosemarie Castoro](#) is a painter from the first

generation of minimalists. [Broadway 1602](#) has two of her paintings from 1965 that use methods derived from modern dance in their composition. They feel perfectly relevant now.

[Robert Mallary](#), who was included in the Museum of Modern Art's 1961 exhibition "Art of Assemblage," is featured at [The Box](#). His dark and existential works, are reminiscent of European painters like Alberto Burri and Antonio Tàpies. [Julian Beck](#), a co-founder of the Living Theater, is represented by paintings and works on paper from the '40s at [Supportico Lopez](#), while an exhibition of [Richard Nonas's](#) drawings from the '70s and small, steel sculptures from the '80s, rearranged on the floor here to respond to the immediate spatial environment, are at [McCaffrey](#).

The Austrian artist [Gerwald Rockenschaub's](#) colored dots displayed throughout the stairwell, courtesy of [Mehdi Chouakri](#), have a '60s feel. [Martos](#) is showing works on paper by Dan Asher from the '80s. Another artist who became known in '80s is [Julia Wachtel](#), who exhibits at the gallery of the Independent co-founder [Elizabeth Dee](#). Given the art world's current interest in the '80s, Ms. Wachtel's paintings, which juxtapose found images with goofy cartoons, look contemporary again.

Another prevalent strain here is so-called outsider art (which also includes people simply unacknowledged by the institutional art world). [Suzanne Zander](#) rounds up William Crawford, an avid draftsman of erotic scenes and photographs taken by an unknown

man named Gunther K. of his red-haired secretary, with whom he had an affair.

[Alice Mackler](#) is a ceramic artist whose brightly glazed sculptures of female figures, with their exaggerated eyes and breasts, look vaguely “outsider.” (She is also represented by [Kerry Schuss](#), who deals in outsider art.) And yet, Ms. Mackler, famous now in her early 80s, doesn’t identify as an outsider artist; her aesthetic shows the blurring of boundaries, which often seems merely a matter of institutional recognition.

There is a lot of painting in this year’s Independent. Painting sells at art fairs, but it’s also popular right now. The young Brooklyn gallery [Real Fine Arts](#) has an extravaganza, with [Nicolas Ceccaldi’s](#) portraits of the writer Michel Houellebecq and Morag Keil’s funny text paintings, as well as a larger abstract canvas by [Jon Pestoni](#).

Beyond the painting-centered nature of the fair, [Art: Concept](#) offers a thoughtful roundup of [Roman Signer’s](#) videos, as well as a work that involves a grand piano, Ping-Pong balls, and fans that blow the balls along the strings. And [Mendes Wood](#) from São Paulo is showing [Adriano Costa’s](#) playful, topical sculptures that address Brazilian politics and culture.

Given the season, there are overlaps with the just-opened Whitney Biennial: Michel Auder and David Diao, both at Office Baroque, are in this year’s edition, as is Paul P., shown here by Broadway 1602.

MARTOS GALLERY

The other hopeful aspects of the season are daylight saving time beginning on Sunday and the forecast for warmer weather, since a selection of books from [Artists Space](#) is for sale on the roof. It is a poignant reminder of the time when the building was occupied by the Dia Art Foundation, conceptual commissions appeared on the roof, and March in New York wasn't dominated by art fairs.

The Independent continues through Sunday at 548 West 22nd Street, Chelsea;
independentnewyork.com.