

Our guide to Independent 2014

Matthew Higgs, the creative adviser of Independent, talks about New York's coolest art fair



Photograph: Charles Benton | Dan Asher, Untitled, 1982

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Photograph: Charles Benton | Dan Asher, Untitled, circa 1980s

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This week, New York's art world experiences its own version of March Madness, as a wave of art fairs hits town—led, as usual, by [the Armory Show](#). In recent years, art fairs have displaced galleries

as the places where collectors do most of their shopping, which is why exhibitors focus on business. But the Independent bucks that model. Instead of booths, the fair, which takes place in Dia's old Chelsea building, is organized almost like a group show. Deals are done, sure, but the proceedings also showcase the art world as a community for dialogue, learning and engagement, with the emphasis on how and why artists make their work. Started in 2010 by Elizabeth Dee and Darren Flook, the fair is curatorially helmed by White Columns director and creative advisor Matthew Higgs. *TONY* recently caught up with Higgs to discuss the fair and its collegiate spirit.

What's the philosophy behind the Independent?

We wanted to show emerging, established and historical works while moving away from the cubicle aesthetic of most art fairs. We're trying to create a platform that's sympathetic to both the audience and participants.

What's your role?

Ultimately, it's quite loose because it's never been defined. But as someone running a non-profit, I'm very interested that such organizations are seen alongside galleries. I'm also interested in presenting what I call maverick dealers.

Like who?

Well, this year we have The Box from Los Angeles, which was co-founded by Paul McCarthy's daughter; they're showing work by American junk artist Robert Mallery. Kerry Schuss, whose gallery offers outsider, folk and contemporary art, is presenting vintage paintings and new ceramics by Alice Mackler, an artist who recently had her first solo show at age 82. Jose Martos is showing pieces by the late Dan Asher, an incredibly underrated New York artist.

How do you decide who goes where, given that you've got blue chip galleries like Michael Werner juxtaposed with emerging spaces?

The idea is to have an intergenerational fair that doesn't reflect the economic pecking order of any particular artist or gallery. Michael Werner's program is interesting because it shows both historical and contemporary positions, so here, he's presenting modernist works by Hans Arp alongside recent pieces by Enrico David.

MARTOS GALLERY

You're including more exhibitors this year; how do you do that and still maintain an intimate environment?

The allocation of the space stays the same because the number of galleries that are collaborating has gone up. For example, Modern Art and Maccarone are sharing a room to present Paul Lee's series of small tambourine paintings. The Independent's manageable scale has always been one of the interesting things about it, and it changes subtly each year as galleries rotate out. It'd be nice to have everyone back each year but the way the fair drifts organically is part of its nuance.

Who do you consider the standout group presentations this year?

Cologne's Susanne Zander is bringing examples of outsider and vernacular photography, including Polaroids of a cross-dressing man shot over a seven year period. Plus, there's an archive documenting a love affair between a German business man and his secretary as well as an extraordinary collection of anonymous found photos by a foot fetishist. And Untitled from New York is showing the work of Brad Troemel, who's invited nine other artists to create two- or three-hour-long solo presentations with the transformation of the space happening in real time while the fair is open.

What about site-specific installations?

Art: Concept from Paris is presenting a great one with a grand piano and videos by Roman Signer, and Berlin's Mehdi Chouakri is installing Gerwald Rockenschaub abstractions throughout the building, even in areas dedicated to other galleries. Dia, the former occupant of this building, had a history of installation art that was thoughtful and responsive to these really beautiful rooms, and we're trying to go for a little of that here.

Besides that, what has been the impact of the building on the show?

For me it's one the most iconic and perfect spaces in New York for art. One of the great things about Independent is that it's not clear where one gallery's presentation begins and another one ends. This year we're working with new architects, Andrew Feuerstein and Bret Quagliara, who've come up with a very dynamic re-imagining of the place. And we're very keen on maintaining the idea that the space here is as much a part of the experience as the work on view.

Independent 2014 is on view Thu 6–Sun 9.