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ART

Women and Minority Artists Flourish Amid Elite Indulgence at the 2019 Armory Show

Progress is incremental, and art fairs are still hellacious places to appreciate art.

By Zachary Small | March 6, 2019

About halfway through my tour of [Armory Show 2019](#), I encountered the gigantesque and hollowed-out sculpture “Plastic Bags” (2019) by Cameroonian artist [Pascale Marthine Tayou](#). Nearby, an overeager gallery attendant explained to a small crowd of glittering culturati how this work speaks to the pollution seen in developing countries. With the exactitude of the artist’s [Wikipedia page](#), she informed her high-net-worth listeners that Tayou wants to “redefine postcolonial culture and raise questions about globalization and modernity” with his work. It also looks really cool from the inside. Cut to the next scene: a woman shoves her french bulldog underneath the sculpture for the perfect Instagram photo as another woman in leopard print edges into the frame.

Let’s get one thing straight: art fairs are hellacious places to appreciate art. Here, contemporary culture rends artists of their political pretense and unmask itself as a collection of shiny baubles for the rich, whom galleries pad with puffery and champagne. White carpeting, white walls, white artists, white gallerists, and white collectors: the homogeneity of these annual events is stifling when considering the great artistic potential of amassing hundreds of artworks under one roof. But for the many galleries that depend on art fairs for exposure and sales, fighting against these prevailing market forces is like spitting into the wind: it’s going to hit you smack in the face.

Those criticisms only partially apply to this year’s Armory Show, which feels like an earnest attempt to nudge the market toward diversity. Despite getting off to [a rocky start](#), the fair’s 25th edition hosts an observable uptick in artworks by women and people of color when compared to past years.

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Erik Thor Sandberg, "Blossom II" (2017), oil on panel

Grander trends within this year's Armory Show are likely obvious to anyone who's hoofed around galleries in the past few years. Surrealism is back with a vengeance, alongside figuration. [Erik Thor Sandberg](#) (on view at the [Connersmith gallery's](#) booth in Pier 90) works in a conceptual mode and color palette similar to René Magritte, but ups the existential ante — if you can believe it. For example, one of his works, called "Blossom II" (2017) features a subject peeling back layers of their own personhood,

reflecting a variety of different personae from different ages, genders, and races. This type of work definitely indulges in the cliché and bathos of the genre — clocks shorn of its numbers, vacant stares mixed with expressions of abject terror — but it still holds one attention better than the many lackluster conceptual-based works on display.

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