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On the Piers, Testing the Waters in a Down Art Market

The signs are literally everywhere in this year's edition of the Armory Show, emblazoned on prints, spelled out in lights, carved in stone: "Capitalism Kills." "Everyone Is Broke." "Don't Cry." "Keep Calm and Carry On."

All parties involved in New York's flagship international contemporary art fair know that, this time around, something serious is up, or rather down. But sub-7,000 Dow or no, the show is not only back in more or less full gear on Pier 94 on the Hudson River, but it's also introducing a substantial and sometimes interesting supplement called the Armory Show Modern on the adjoining Pier 92.

The Armory Show, which is on through Sunday, has always been closely watched for what it has to say about the health of the art market. Scrutiny will be particularly intense this year. And while sales tallies can't be known for some days, observers may perceive advance indicators of distress.

For one thing, several fair stalwarts, who are also large art-world names, have not returned this year, among them Lehmann Maupin, Friedrich Petzel, Greene Naftali, the Project, Patrick Painter and Matthew Marks. Mr. Marks's absence carries particular psychological significance, as he was — along with Pat Hearn, Colin de Land and Paul Morris — one of the fair's founders 15 years ago.

And then there's the first-time presence of the historical Modernist component, comprising some 60 galleries. What's that about? From a practical point of view, it helps pick up some of the dropout slack, pushing the total number of booths this year to well more than 200. It may also have been calculated to attract a more seasoned and financially less volatile collecting audience to the fair, now that the hedge funders have high-tailed it.

And maybe the thinking was just by being big and new, it might give the whole enterprise a lift, which it needs. The Armory Show is feeling its years. What began as a larky meet-and-greet weekend in bedroom suites of the Gramercy Park Hotel is now a marketing convention standard in every way, right down to overpriced salads, crummy coffee and the presence of people who actually believe they are V.I.P.'s.

The addition of a Modernist component basically kills off any scant remaining trace of the fair's original character, and that may be a bad idea in the long run. In the short run, though, it lends the proceedings a historical gloss.

The Armory Show is, after all, named for the famous 1913 New York exhibition that introduced European avant-garde art en masse to America. At least some of the Modern art present this year dates to that era. And it is a useful, not to say opportunistic, reminder of how fluid and interchangeable the terms like Modern and contemporary, classical and cutting edge, can be.

Let's start with the classical Modernism on Pier 92, which includes some marquee names (Rothko, de Kooning, Picasso, what have you). For the most part it is spaciouly installed, with natural light: in a solo installation of geometric abstractions by Burgoyne Diller at Spanierman Modern, in a misty Giorgio Morandi landscape at Studio la Città, visiting from Italy, and in a tiny drawing in the same booth by Lucio Fontana, a network of thin ink lines with a dot of gold like a spider in the center.

A 1957 abstract painting by Conrad Marca-Relli (1913-2000) at Washburn is also Modernist for sure. But a terrifically nutty 1991 wall sculpture called "Chain Mail Pizzeria" by Salvatore Scarpitta (1919-2007), with pizza paddles doubling as snowshoes, has contemporary written all over it, and this despite the fact that the artists share almost the same dates.

Mr. Scarpitta was a crossover figure. He hung out with Abstract Expressionists in the 1950s but was around to salvage the sign of the Cedar Tavern in Greenwich Village when the bar was demolished years ago. (The sign is currently on view in Washburn's 57th Street digs.)

The Argentinian artist León Ferrari, who is seen at Sicardi Gallery from Houston and will be having a show at the Museum of Modern Art this spring, is another such figure. He was there for the birth of Latin American Modernism decades ago but now, in his 80s, still paints in his Buenos Aires studio every day. Does this make him a contemporary artist or Modernist? Both, I would say.

And there is no more contemporary-feeling work on either pier this year than the rare little early-1920s watercolor by the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven found at the booth of the Manhattan dealers Amy Wolf and Marianne Elrick-Manley in the Armory Show Modern.

Freytag-Loringhoven (1874-1927), best known as the Baroness, was a Dada artist and poet, a Modernist muse and an immortal eccentric who was financially supported for several years in New York by the photographer Berenice Abbott. Eventually Abbott stopped the support; the watercolor is the Baroness's rebuke to her erstwhile benefactress.

In it she depicts Abbott as a booted foot walking out of the picture, leaving her umbrella, leaning against a urinal, behind. Written across the image are the words, "Forgotten Like This Parapluie Am I by You — Faithless Bernice!"

The painting is personal, sexual, political, funny, outrageous, all qualities one usually associates with contemporary art, but that one rarely finds in so pure, witty and concentrated a form in the works this year at the Armory Show proper on Pier 94, or at least not in a single object.

There are exceptions. One is Mickalene Thomas's "Something You Can Feel," a kind of Byzantine mosaic of a painting at Rhona Hoffman that's done in rhinestones and acrylic and generates all kinds of attitude. Another is a sardonic picture conflating military invasions and gym workouts by the Iranian artist Tala Madani at Lombard-Freid Projects. A meticulously knotted and twisted wall sculpture by the assemblagist John Outterbridge at Jack Tilton is a third.

More often, though, in this year's show, which tends to play down singular, big-ticket items, the strongest and most complex impressions are made by several solo and two-person

installations. And the best of these tend to be in a cleaned-out, stripped-down style. Derek Eller has a beauty of a two-person show, matching small, dark graphite drawings of art-historical photographs by Dan Fischer with light-reflecting spiral sculpture by Alyson Shotz.

At Daniel Reich, the German artist Susanne M. Winterling has cooked up a homage to Isadora Duncan that doesn't look like such a thing, or like anything recognizable, for that matter, which is fine, given all the too clearly readable work elsewhere in the show. Ms. Winterling's studied abstraction is nicely complemented by painted landscapes by Paul P. that surround it at Reich and by enigmatic conversation pieces by Amir Mogharabi.

Of the one-person shows, a wraparound, wallpaperish 1976 Hanne Darboven piece at Galerie Crone conveys an unfrivolous, tight-lipped rigor, while a here-and-there installation of abstract paintings by Matt Connor at Canada gives an impression of slouchy, low-budget cheerfulness. Sarah Braman's sculptures at Museum 52 have a similar hapless but happening air. They look like a closetful of broken furniture that is slowly mending itself.

In all three solos the sheen and preciousness that tend to be hallmarks of the made-for-art-fair art we have seen so much of in the past decade is replaced by plain, good-enough textures and an unassertive conceptual presence: we're about something but not primarily about art school, or forever, or breaking the bank.

This is also true of the fair's single largest installation, the fully stocked psychic apothecary shop set up by the artist Christine Hill at Ronald Feldman Gallery. Take your hopes, fears and neuroses to the counter, and Ms. Hill will personally dispense a consoling if not curative remedy, cheap.

Ms. Hill's installation neatly blurs, and mocks as improbable, distinctions drawn between art and business, and offers instead a laid-back model of art-as-business. Like any professional selling her wares, she papers the premises with posters strenuously advertising the success of her product.

Everyone involved in this year's Armory Show is, naturally, anxious for the art business, against odds, to succeed, as are the participants in several other fairs taking place in the city this weekend: Pulse, Scope, Volta, the Bridge Art Fair, the Pool Art Fair and the Fountain Art Fair.

After Sunday, they'll have a clearer sense of whether they should be planning a 2010 return. Meanwhile, all concerned will keep calm and carry on, and listen for those golden words, actually spelled out in blue neon on a wall at Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin: "Stop the Complaint; We Just Bought It."