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Last minute work on a work by Assume Vivid Astro Focus at John Connelly Presents



The Deitch Projects booth at the Armory Show 2006



Tim Davis
Daedelus & Icarus
2003
Greenburg Van Doren

THE ARMORY BOWL

by Ben Davis

Ascending the elevator at Pier 92 to the Armory Show on Thursday afternoon, two gallery assistants were bracing themselves for the mega-fair to come, commenting that it would be some time before they got any sleep once the show began. "Sleep!" a grizzled art handler chimed in, "What's that? I've been here three days straight!"

All this sweated labor over objects of beauty makes one thing clear -- the Armory Show is the contemporary art world's version of the Super Bowl, its giant, emblematic centerpiece, complete with mass attendance and ludicrously overpriced concessions.

Art dealers can claim more stamina than athletes, though, since the Super Bowl lasts four hours and the Armory Show five days. The blitzkrieg of galleries that swamps New York's Piers 90 and 92, Mar. 9-13, 2006, means more art doing battle for the attention of more buyers surrounded by more events and more info, with hopefully more sales logged.

Critics are quick to note that this kind of overkill makes the notion of art appreciation at the fair a bit like trying on Sunday hats in a wind tunnel. The Armory's not the best place to go to see new work, either; the home galleries are better for viewing new art displayed in depth, at more considered length.

Still, as that great fan of contemporary art G.W.F. Hegel always liked to say, changes in quantity become changes in quality, so it's worth puzzling out the quality of art proper to this level of spectacle. Among other things, the Armory's scale demands art that is grand and easily digestible, superficially complex, knowingly artificial and/or coolly fetishistic -- hence, the inclusion at multiple booths of Alex Katz (grand and easily digestible), Anselm Reyle (superficially complex), Jonathan Lasker (knowingly artificial) and Julian Opie (coolly fetishistic).

Putting aside sheer scale -- Barnaby Furnas' cataclysmic, mural-sized *Red Sea* (2006) at Marianne Boesky takes the cake on that score -- another sure strategy is to riff off other artworks. Thus, Jake and Dinos Chapman's retouchings of original Goya etchings at London's White Cube Gallery (£13,500 each), turning the Old Master's sinister allegories into contemporary Swamp Things, seem particularly evocative. Tokyo's Gallery Side 2 offers Shinkako Sato's glammed up collages using iconic Japanese prints, adding glitter and Barbie stickers to the images of women in kimonos (\$2,500).

Perhaps the most poignant version of the approach is Tim Davis' photo *Daedelus & Icarus* (2003) at the booth of Greenburg Van Doren (\$6,500). A C-print of an oil painting featuring the eponymous mythical heroes, captured so that the glare of the flash on the gloss surface coincides with the fallen hero's head, the work neatly demonstrates how the butting together of different arts can serve to obscure them or to make them burn more fiercely -- or possibly do both at the same time.



Rashad Glover & Emily Eastridge
Cashin' In
 2006
 Tilton Gallery



Wang Ziwei
Untitled
 2005
 Ghislaine Hussenot



Alexis Rockman
Hurricane & Sun
 2006
 Leo Koenig, Inc.

Directly acknowledging the consumerism of the affair also wins points. Who can resist the knickknackism of Cereal Art, offering a booth full of jokey artist-designed kitsch products? Following a starring role in the 2006 Whitney Biennial, the Wrong Gallery is given pride of place at Cereal Art's door with a small sculpture recreating the minute Wrong Gallery space ("the smallest gallery in the world"), yours for \$1,200.

At New York's Tilton Gallery, a large photo of a grinning Tupac Shakur lookalike, posed in front of a leopard-print background as a leering woman peels dollar bills from under his cap, the slogan "Bringing IT to you" blazed across the bottom, both satirizes and wallows in the crassness of the trade in sensationalist images. It's called *Cashin' In*, and is \$3,500. A mellow, untitled watercolor by Jeff Sonhouse, featuring the face of solemn-looking African-American gentleman with burnt matches for hair is more imaginative -- but is stuffed together on a wall with various other works from the Tilton stable.

Commercial anxieties of more world-historical importance are crystallized in other works, like Ena Swansea's *American Bank* (2006) at Galerie Crone from Berlin, a wall-sized oil- and graphite-on-linen painting featuring a monolithic concrete building labeled "World Savings," rising above a dense jungle that threatens to overwhelm it. At Paris' Ghislaine Hussenot, Wang Ziwei's painting featuring a magic, floating Chairman Mao head on a bright yellow background, lording over a gaping Mickey, Donald and Goofy, neatly encapsulates the simultaneous sense of China as capitalist utopia and site of immanent world disaster.

Maybe it's because the hypertrophy of the Armory Show produces a sense of the erosion of meaning that such vaguely apocalyptic works seem appropriate. At the booth of Galerie Georges-Philippe & Nathalie Vallois from Paris, Alain Bublex's digitally manipulated photos imagine urban space as slowly being taken over by undifferentiated, mechanical units that resemble shipping containers (\$5,500 for works from his "Houston" series). Hip New York dealer Leo Koenig makes it even more explicit with Alexis Rockman's suite of end-of-the-world paintings, including *Hurricane & Sun*, an oil-on-paper work from 2006 featuring a menacing storm bursting in on a clear sky. At \$15,000, it was already sold by 4 pm on Thursday.

Similar combinations of darkness and excess stuck out elsewhere. The great display of handcrafted wooden guns and knives made by Damien Ortega at Kurimansutto Gallery from Mexico City (\$45,000); Jonathan Schipper's surveillance society commentary, a robotic ball of 215 TV monitors, at Williamsburg's Pierogi (\$60,000); McDermott & McGogh's *The Vilest Way*, at Cheim & Reid, a large-scale painting from 2005, featuring flowery calligraphy exhorting the viewer to sexual violence (\$80,000); and, most pleasingly allegoric of all, Valerie Hegarty's *Still lives with crows* at Guild & Greyshkul (\$30,000), a paper assemblage resembling a flock of crows tearing bloody hunks of meat out of a painting of a steak -- a goof on the old Greek myth of Zeuxis and Parrhasios, and a picture of image culture cannibalizing itself.

The most powerful pieces of art take this condition as subject without making it too ponderously obvious. A masterpiece of the fair is Gabi Trinkaus' vast, serenely tangled panorama of a city at night, buildings and neon signs smoldering along with pulsing veins of traffic (\$23,500), at the stand of Georg Kargl from Vienna. Upon closer inspection, the work is a collage, expertly pieced together out of cut-up fragments of magazine ads. As if in answer to that anonymous art handler from the elevator, redeeming the Herculean effort that goes into such a show, the work is titled *You Can Sleep*.



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Work by Damien Ortega at the booth of kurimanzutto



Valerie Hegarty
Still lives with crows
2006
Guild & Greyshkul



Visitors ponder Gabi Trinkaus' *You can sleep* (2006) at Georg Kargl