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Art Fairs Come Blazing Back, Precarious but Defiant

New and overlooked artists shine at the Armory Show, New York's largest in-person fair since the pandemic, and other shows across the city.



Inside the sprawling Javits Center, the new home of the Armory Show, awaiting its first visitors on Thursday. Credit... Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

By Will Heinrich

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Even before Covid, the art world was changing rapidly. Sales that used to happen in New York or Basel, via hushed conversation, now happen through Instagram all over the world. Large galleries are merging to keep up with mega-galleries, while small galleries, somehow, keep multiplying.

From a strictly business point of view, this fall's Art Week — which was postponed from spring and runs through Sunday — represents an attempt to carry on with the way things used to be, albeit with some adjustments. The Armory Show, the first major American art fair since the pandemic, has become even more American as travel restrictions and complications knocked 55 mostly European exhibitors into the fair's new online-only component. Visitors to the sprawling Javits Center in Manhattan, the show's new home, will have to prove that they're vaccinated or have a recent negative coronavirus test, as they will at most of the week's venues. (Check health protocols beforehand.)

When the Armory Show moved to the fall, satellite shows such as Spring/Break, Art on Paper, Clio, and the stylish little Independent followed it to September. The all-new Future Fair, founded in 2020, is finally happening in person, too. By and large, these are the New York art fairs as you've known and loved, or hated them, and it simply isn't clear yet if attendance and sales will keep their model viable.

For most people, of course, the business of art is in the background right now. Asked what counts as a success at the gallery's first live fair appearance since Covid, Lisa Spellman, the founder of the 303 Gallery, replied, "Just seeing people!" Ebony L. Haynes, who will be directing the David Zwirner gallery's new TriBeCa space in October, said, "You can never replace seeing art in person."

That excitement itself is grounds for optimism. "One of the main reasons for a thriving art market is exciting art," said Jeffrey Deitch, a gallerist opening two New York shows this weekend. "And we have exciting art right now."

And for the first time in a long time, we also have a community seeing that art together. As Tom Eccles, who directs the Hessel Museum of Art, put it, “Art needs, or the art market needs, a society around it.”

What follows is a guide to the highlights of a defiant, resilient, precarious, and exciting new season of art — and its society — in New York. Martha Schwendener reviews the Independent Art Fair, while Siddhartha Mitter takes on the new Future Fair, and I preview the Armory Show, below.

What to See at the Armory Show

The 157 exhibitors at the Javits Center are divided into sections: the presentations in Focus, curated by Wassan Al-Khudhairi, of the Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis, are more topical; Presents includes younger galleries; Solo is for single-artist presentations; and Galleries includes larger names.

Platform, a free-standing section in the middle of the hall (look for Michael Rakowitz’s terrific cardboard relief sculptures and an enormous painting by Benny Andrews), was curated by Claudia Schmuckli of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Here are the galleries not to miss, along with their booth numbers.

Solo Section:

Goya Contemporary Gallery, S3



Elizabeth Talford Scott’s “Upside Downwards” (1992) and “Flower Garden” (1989) at Goya Contemporary booth. Credit... Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

In an art fair full of loud colors jostling for attention, six astonishing quilts stand out as the real deal. Made by Elizabeth Talford Scott (1916-2011) in the '80s and '90s, the pieces are irregularly shaped and incorporate loose thread, beads, sequins, and even tight little bags of polished pebbles along with their many tiny snippets of highly patterned fabric. They’re almost like feats of higher math: They seem much too complicated to hang together as singular compositions, but somehow, still, they do.