

Independent 20th Century and the Armory Show Reviews: An Inclusive Kickoff to the Art Season

One fair looks to expand the modernist canon while another highlights the many voices working in contemporary art.

By Brian P. Kelly

Sept. 8, 2023 at 5:33 pm ET

New York

The art world and the NFL both kicked off their seasons on Thursday with more than a little in common. Eager crowds. Small fortunes trading hands. Hard-edge competition to acquire undervalued talent. But there are no scoreboards in the gallery world, so determining winners proves far trickier in that arena.

Nevertheless, at Independent 20th Century and the Armory Show fans of various artistic stripes will find something to cheer for.

Downtown, just off the Battery, the Independent Art Fair's intimate offshoot returns for its second year, looking to expand—not rewrite—the 20th-century canon with 30-some exhibitors. This elevated approach—augmenting history instead of supplanting it—is especially welcome these days, with many of the galleries making strong cases that artists forgotten or overlooked, especially on grounds of cultural or gender norms, deserve to have their legacies included in the modernist historical record.

Most impressive on that front is the display of baskets at Donald Ellis Gallery, woven by Louisa Keyser, also known as Dat So La Lee. Keyser (1850-1925), a member of the Washoe people, is highly regarded by appreciators of American Indian art and basketry, but this collection of her marvelously geometric work

initial art and basketry, but this collection of her marvelously geometric work proves that she should also be heralded as a pioneering modernist, an icon in her field as finely attuned to form as any artist working in her lifetime. Her intricate patterns—blazes and diamonds aplenty—and ultrafine weaving meant that individual works could take a year to make. This display makes an important case not just for Keyser's place in art history, but also for more inclusively evaluating indigenous art as a whole.

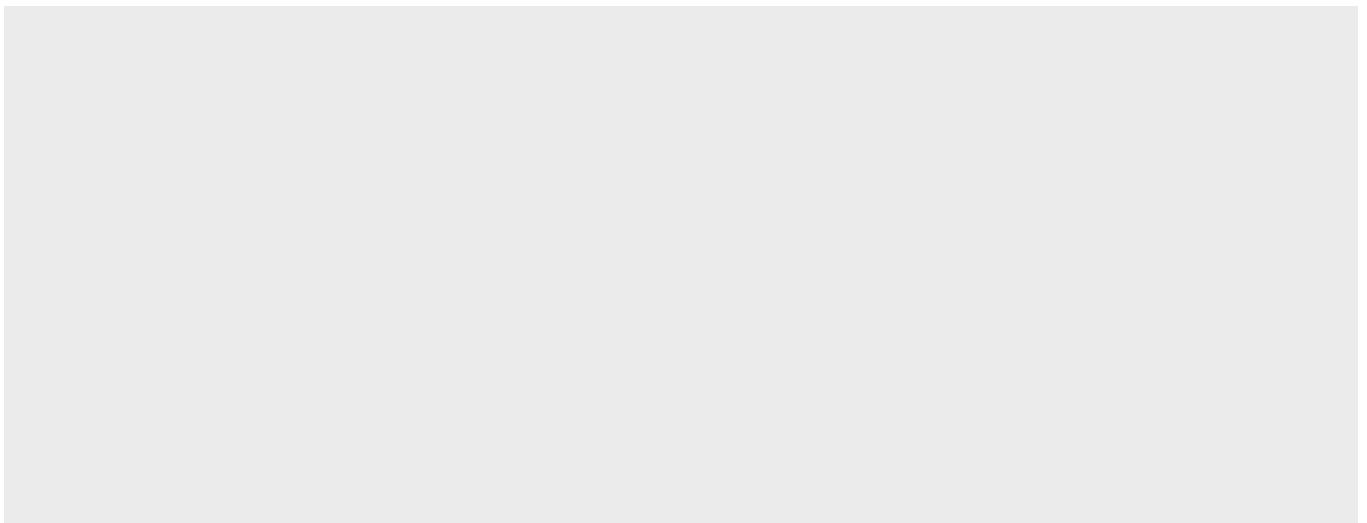
While Keyser had a successful career, her medium meant that she was largely seen as a craftsperson (albeit one whose emphasis was on aesthetics, not utility). Hal Busse (1926-2018), on the other hand, found recognition in the postwar German art world—shows, residencies and membership in the influential ZERO group. That is, until her marriage to another artist and motherhood led to her fading from the scene. Beck & Eggeling's booth brings Busse back to the foreground, showing her work—its fiery reds and oranges and frequent circle motifs looking for a non-objective path forward in art after the devastation of the war—alongside several of her ZERO colleagues.

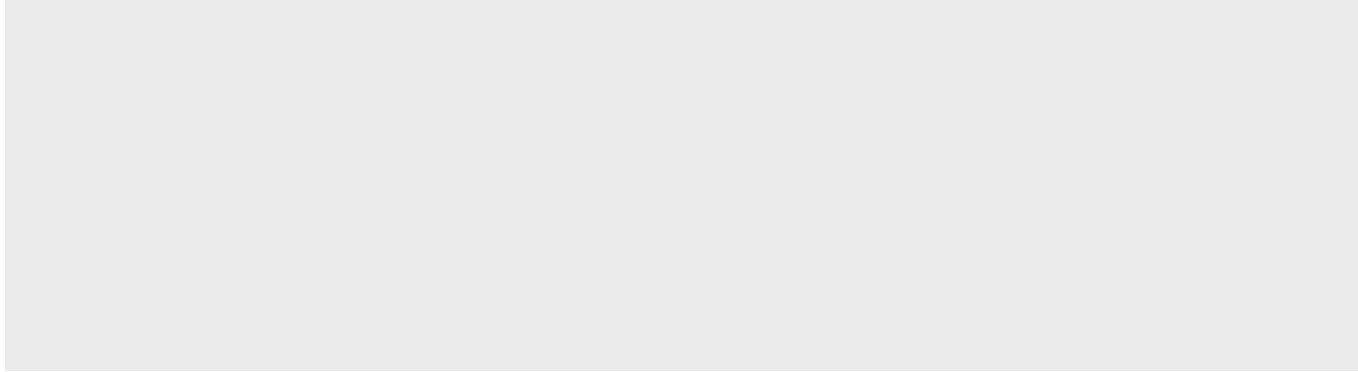
Similarly underappreciated due to her era's gender norms was Marie Laurencin (1883-1956), shown here by Nahmad Contemporary. In the male-dominated world of avant-garde 20th-century Paris, her circle included famed Cubists like Braque and Léger, but she dedicated herself to figuration. And while she enjoyed some prominence during her life—her art graced the cover of *Vogue* and she exhibited at the seismic 1913 Armory Show—her commitment to non-abstract subjects that were exclusively female did little to ensure the longevity of her popularity. The women in these works, fair skinned and softly rendered in pastel hues, are unapologetic in their feminine strength, staring confidently out from the canvas on their own or grouped into supportive sororities.

Discoveries (or rediscoveries) like these are what make Independent 20th Century a delight. Also notable are the borderline-surreal paintings and sculptures of Miguel dos Santos at Galatea (from São Paulo, Brazil), human and inviting while feeling totemic and shamanistic, and Klaus Liebig's paintings at Berlin's Galerie Michael Janssen, giving stream-of-consciousness a visual outlet with their clustered images oozing sexuality and pop-culture references.

While there are some wasted opportunities here—can a fair booth showing Calder or Picasso really shine new light on names that are so familiar?—there are few miscues, and Independent 20th Century has quickly established itself as a can't-miss stop on any fall art itinerary.

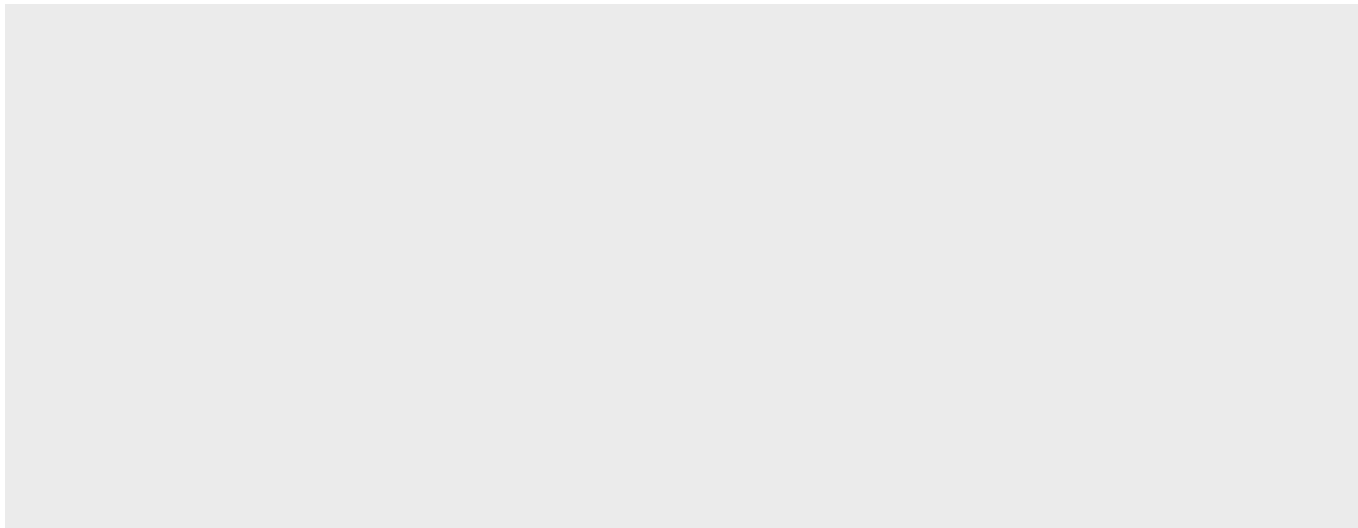
Farther uptown at the Javits Center, some of the best work at the Armory Show also comes from traditionally overlooked groups. This is particularly true in the fair's Focus section, which foregrounds artists outside the mainstream, with indigenous creators a major highlight this year. Living and working in Peru, Sara Flores, shown by Clearing, creates geometric works that are deeply rooted in her Shipibo-Conibo heritage. Inspired by her people's history and ayahuasca rituals, patterns seem to replicate themselves across her canvases but on closer inspection unfold into intricate mazes, each unique—a form called *kené* that is passed from mother to child in the matriarchal society. At the booth of Australia's This Is No Fantasy, Yhonnie Scarce (Kokatha and Nukunu) and Johnathon World Peace Bush (Tiwi) look at the history of colonization in that country through different lenses. Ms. Scarce's large-scale screenprints of churches on reservations to which native peoples were removed, cast in the color of dried blood, are a stark reminder of the religious cover given to many historical atrocities. Mr. Bush's work takes a rosier view: Painted in warm ochres, his canvases draw on famous masterpieces and religious icons and render them in indigenous patterns and symbols, creating a synthesis of these different cultures and emphasizing the best in both.





Installation view, Cathrin Hoffmann PHOTO: PUBLIC GALLERY

As is usual at this massive showcase—this year Armory includes over 225 exhibitors from some 35 countries—the most engaging presentations foreground just one or two artists. In the Solo section, Bridget Mullen’s paintings at Shulamit Nazarian are tightly coiled psychedelic meditations. Though largely abstract, more figurative elements creep in—a limb, some plants—and combine in works of formal bliss. In the Presents section, with galleries no more than 10 years old, Jack Barrett showed Malaysian-born Timothy Lai’s intimate interiors that feature couples and dogs in quiet moments, their compositions redolent of Old Masters and their impastoed surfaces of glowing flesh tones hinting at Lucian Freud. Cathy Lu’s installation at Micki Meng’s booth drew on her Chinese-American identity to riff on the idea of “white tears,” with sets of ceramic eyes—based on real faces, from the artist’s own to Michelle Kwan’s—streaming yellow water into buckets on the floor. It was a highlight of the fair, both humorous and touching, a painful reminder of the recent spate of anti-Asian violence and that demographic’s struggles over the centuries.





Installation view, Anthony Goicolea PHOTO: CRONE BERLIN

Elsewhere, at Loock Galerie, Hayley Quentin's delicate canvases of watercolor and colored pencil explore themes of mirroring and female identity with diaphanous hints of ghostly women peering out at the viewer. Patel Brown pairs work by Marigold Santos and by Rajni Perera in a booth that dives into ideas of masking and how we present ourselves to others. In Ms. Santos's acrylics, a wide-brimmed *salakot*—a traditional hat from the artist's homeland of the Philippines—hides the face of a shape-shifting figure. In Ms. Perera's large mixed-media piece, a trio of nudes float ethereally underwater, wearing masks tied to her Sri Lankan heritage. Another masked figure—Brobdingnagian and rendered in polymer clay—crawls across the floor, a creative collaboration between the two artists.

At Overduin & Co. both Poppy Jones and Nicholas Bierk embrace realism but take it in different directions. Her finely rendered closeups of quotidian subjects—a shirt front, a vase of flowers—are delicately applied to silk or suede, lending them especially tactile qualities, whereas his oils revel in the use of light and shadow, which along with a muted palette gives his paintings a mysterious quality. Despite their varying approaches, this pairing shows that realism is alive and well in contemporary art. And, while it's impossible to acknowledge all the standout works at such a sprawling fair, I'd be remiss not to mention Cathrin Hoffmann's colorful German Expressionist-meets-digital-technology nudes at Public Gallery; Abbas Nasle Shamloo's imagined vistas of human decay—abandoned boats, crumbling sheds—at SARAI Gallery; and Anthony Goicolea's unsettling paintings of adolescents that hint at the horrors of war and displacement at Galerie Crone. While the number of exhibitors at the Armory Show may be overwhelming, it does ensure—especially when paired with a trip to Independent 20th Century—a satisfying lineup for every ilk of art lover.

...ing me up for every ...

Mr. Kelly is the Journal's associate Arts in Review editor. Follow him on Twitter @bpkelly89.