

Art Fairs in New York City

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It was a festival of fairs: seven—count them—seven art fairs in five days, hundreds of galleries, and thousands of artists. But remember Pablo Helguera's argument, that art is an "entrepreneurial religion." This was a corporate festival. The art gathered here reflected on sales more than contemporary culture. The less market-friendly collectives and post-colonial discourses that define a large part of the emerging contemporary art world had no voice. Latin representation was low, although the good news continued to be the integration of Latin artists into the mainstream art scene. A quick survey of the almost 2,000 artists at the Armory Show revealed that around one hundred Latin artists (or five percent of the total) were distributed among many galleries. Maybe that's why it was harder to find the critical edges that so much Latin art presents.

The Armory Show

The major venue was newly unified onto one Hudson River pier, and it was the most publicized, with thick crowds and lines several blocks long. With 52,000 visitors and total sales in excess of \$85 million, the fair had a surprisingly large, young crowd who did not buy but treated the fair as a serious cultural event, not simply as a place to be seen.

Mierle Laderman. *Ukeles' Social Mirror*, 1983. Installation. Variable dimensions. Photo: Cathy Serrano. Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.



The fair was dedicated to new art by living artists with approximately 150 galleries from thirty-eight international cities and twenty-two countries with another 400 gallery applicants not juried in. Around half were from Europe, with most from the expected centers of Berlin, London, and Paris. Thirty percent were from New York City but, with another eleven percent from outside the city, the U.S. galleries totaled forty-one percent. There were surprisingly few Latin artists among the twelve Los Angeles galleries. Only one gallery was dedicated to Latin art, Enrique Guerrero from Mexico City.

Most of the work was characterized as "very been-there-looking," meaning that well-established artists and trends continued. The large amounts of photography celebrated traditional modes of portraiture, landscape, and fiction with less fantasy and more edge than previous years. The small, imagined fantasy worlds seemed to shift from escapism to warnings.

Formalist art (never dead) returned, often through abstraction, with nature and science (and likely the tastes of the art market) as sources. I liked it best when there was self-conscious play in the work. The Gering & López Gallery mounted a green light box by Leo Villareal opposite a green acrylic field painting by an older Spaniard, José Ma Yturralde, which very neatly probed the modernist questions of aesthetics, absorption, and spirituality.

The many individual artist displays worked best as installations. Yayoi Kusama's 120 boxes of stuffed fiber phalluses covered with polka dots (*Repetitions*) created a wall of stares and pokey fun at the Robert Miller Gallery. Parked literally opposite was the most sensational and most reported piece: the large (twenty-five ton) New York City garbage truck covered in hand-fitted, tempered mirrors by Mierle Laderman Ukeles at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. The title *Social Mirror* spoke of the intent, and sanitation workers were available for conversations with the public, along with the artist.

At Galerie Enrique Guerrero, Enrique Jezik's *Practica* struck home with ten life-size shooting-practice silhouettes of black paint on white wood, each with five shotgun blasts through them. At the same gallery, Pablo Helguera, another specialist in social unrest, showed sample collages from his *Pan American Suite*; they addressed the realities of life around us, like little postcards that bombed the brain. The Dutch artist Folkert de Jong's life-size figures, *The Death March* (at James Cohan Gallery), had the historical faces of American freedom—Abraham Lincoln and Benjamin Franklin—and limped under the weight of a decidedly contemporary and unheroic historical burden, like wounded ogres in confectionary, expressionist colors.