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The United States of Armory



Armory Show 2013's Focus section (All photos by author for Hyperallergic)

Every year, the Armory Show art fair chooses an area of the globe to zoom in on for its Focus section, a curated selection of mostly emerging galleries that often includes some of the fair's chief highlights and surprises. For 2013, the Armory's Focus section takes on its own home base, the United States. We all know the art world can be a little narcissistic, but at first this sounded ridiculous.

The Armory Fair is located in New York City, the chief hub of contemporary visual art in the country, if not the world. Visitors to the Armory are spoiled for choice when it comes to catching a glimpse of the American visual arts community, and locals are already overrun with opportunities to see American exhibitions in New York. An American section might be a great opportunity, then, to expose some other areas of the country to the Armory's international crew of collectors and give attention to the United States art world's fringe cities, but the section fails to accomplish that.

Out of a list of 17 galleries in the Armory Focus: USA section, fully seven are from New York City alone, with the rest sprinkled through Washington, DC, San Francisco, Boston, and other cities. Starting out with such a selection bias, it would be hard to get any generalized (or even surprising, to New York audiences) view of the nation's visual arts culture. Many of the highlighted galleries came out with guns blazing in great booths, but in the context of its curatorial aims, it fell flat. Perhaps Shiner's devotion to Warhol explains why Gagosian is given an enormous space at the outset of the Focus section. The mega-gallery is showing a booth covered in Andy Warhol screenprint wallpaper, hung with a sprawling camouflage painting that, according to Artsy, is not for sale, though other works, like a camouflage

Warhol self-portrait, are. It's an ostentatious display that is visually striking and fun, but it cheapens the section's commitment to young talent, of which there is plenty.

If the Armory Show 2013's Focus section represents America, then it's a Gagosian America, where the one percent occupies a great deal more real estate than its name implies. The mega-gallery is a prominent presence in art fairs around the world, as is only to be expected, but one wonders if it's altogether wise to devote so much space to the single biggest commercial gallery around in an area of the fair usually given to less commercial, more critical explorations of contemporary art.

Suzanne Geiss's brash full-booth installation by Assume Vivid Astro Focus was a feast for the eyes, with brightly hued wallpaper reminiscent of that pipe screensaver on old Windows computers providing the background for slick red, black, and white geometric-figurative paintings and light-up word sculpture that played on the collective's name as well as the aesthetics of graffiti handstyle.

Next door, the pioneering photography gallery Higher Pictures showed three of Artie Vierkant's luminous, unstable image-objects, diaphanous abstractions that provide a hypnotizing visual component to the artist's more conceptual, meta-critical web-based efforts. Director Kim Bourus seemed to be getting intense interest in the pieces even during the preview.

Magnan Metz gallery picked up on the full-booth trend with a display of rough-hewn, folksy work by Duke Riley. A faux-naif depiction of a tree stump made entirely of cigarettes with different, dun-colored wrappers was immediately charming, as was Invisible Export's display of paintings by Cary Leibowitz, scrawled with shaky, confessional handwriting. His "SAD" pie chart wouldn't be out of place in a bedroom on the popular television series *Girls*.



Liz Magic Laser's promotional materials for Armory 2013 at Various Small Fires

Los Angeles was represented by the recently opened gallery Various Small Fires, which filled its booth with work by Liz Magic Laser. Laser is the 2013 Armory Show's commissioned artist; she created the brand identity and promotional materials for the fair. The result is a series of hilarious, straight-faced, blandly corporate objects that openly expose some of the fair's inner workings, quoting price statistics for booths and disclosing the sheer volume of VIP passes on offer (almost 13,000, if you were wondering). On the exterior face of the gallery's booth was a one-way mirror — you could see out, but not in. Ultimately, that subversive self-criticality, along with diversity, is what the Focus section could have used more of.