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Armory Show aims to raise the bar amid threat from younger rivals

New York's largest art fair celebrates 100th birthday, but success of competitors places Armory in something of an identity crisis

The Armory Show, New York's largest art fair, opened to the press under a menacing gray sky, with the Hudson river churning angrily alongside the two piers it requisitions for exhibition spaces. It seemed a fittingly ominous atmosphere for the city's main festival of contemporary-art buying and champagne-soaked social climbing, whose future has recently been called into doubt.

On the surface, Armory is in a celebratory mood. The year 2013 marks the 100th anniversary of the groundbreaking 1913 Armory Show, which changed the course of art history by introducing American audiences to Marcel Duchamp and other figures of the European avant garde. The contemporary Armory Show, which borrowed the old fair's name when it began in 1999, is paying tribute with a series of talks and events highlighting the influence of that early fair.

Several galleries' booths here also commemorate the 1913 show, the most impressive of which comes from veteran New York dealer Francis M Naumann. Naumann spent a year putting together his presentation, which places works by the French American master alongside pieces by Duchamp-besotted artists such as Larry Rivers and Sherrie Levine. "Collectors are finally warming to Duchamp," the dealer said. "He's where everything begins."

Yet expectations have been restrained among dealers and collectors for this centennial-in-name-only edition of Armory. A planned sale of the fair to Louise Blouin, the Canadian art publisher, fell apart in January; no new buyer has arisen. And three other New York fairs have grown in popularity and profitability in recent years, placing the Armory in something of an identity crisis.

The Art Show, organized by the Art Dealers Association of America and the country's oldest continuous fair, has undergone a considerable revival in the last five years, reestablishing itself as the go-to spot for blue-chip art and the one-percenters

who love it. At the VIP preview, dealers who once presented unthreatening painting and sculpture displayed younger, riskier work, such as a tattooed taxidermied pig by the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye.

Thursday marks the opening of Independent New York, the young, rule-breaking fair with no walls between the booths and no admissions charge that's now attracting young and established dealers alike.

And lurking in the background is Frieze New York, the London fair's Big Apple spinoff. At its inaugural edition last May, Frieze overcame doubts that collectors would travel all the way to its curvaceous tent on Randall's Island, in the East river. Dealers who took a chance on Frieze's first edition are coming back for more this spring. And the success of Frieze has taught Armory that it needs to adapt or sink. "I wouldn't have this job if it weren't for Frieze New York," said Noah Horowitz, the Armory's young new executive director, whose task has been to refresh a declining institution. "When they announced they were coming to New York, they really forced us to raise the bar. There's been a huge push to filter – that meant thinning the number of galleries, more solo presentations, curated projects. That's all something that I've overseen and that I'm really passionate about."

Against the British invasion, Armory is promoting its New York bona fides. Taxicab-yellow chairs are scattered throughout the piers, and at the fair's press opening Mike Bloomberg himself praised the resilience of the city's galleries in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, which flooded Chelsea and destroyed untold numbers of artworks. This year Armory also teamed up with the website Artsy – the years-in-the-making startup backed by Wendi Murdoch and Dasha Zhukova, among others – to let collectors preview art before the fair began. More than 2,500 works were online before the VIPs trounced in Wednesday morning, ahead of the public opening Thursday.

Horowitz has also attracted several galleries that have stayed away in past years, such as Zurich's Galerie Eva Presenhuber, whose striking booth included work from the Norwegian provocateur Matias Faldbakken and the late San Francisco painter Jay DeFeo. Hometown heavyweight Larry Gagosian is participating in his first Armory, shrugging off both legal troubles and several artists' defections. His booth showcases several late Warhols against a monstrously large stretch of the artist's own wallpaper.

There are also new participants from further afield. "I'm here because of Noah," confided Meg Maggio, the director of Pékin Fine Arts, a gallery with locations in both Beijing and Hong Kong. "It's a much better feeling than in years past; the last time I was here I lasted only 45 minutes." At her booth, ink drawings by the Chinese artist Chen Shaoxing depict protestors from Occupy Wall Street to Burma's democracy advocates to Madrid's indignados movement: yours to keep for \$65,000. Still, many of the most prominent galleries have stayed away. New York dealers such as Marian Goodman and Luhring Augustine have opted for the tonier ADAA fair, while Gavin Brown and Maureen Paley are exhibiting at the edgier

Independent. And all four of those will be at Frieze in May, as will Hauser & Wirth, the Zurich-London-New York colossus.

The best hope for the Armory Show may be that the New York art world, thriving off of the increasing concentration of wealth in the hands of the super-rich, can probably sustain multiple major fairs. One of the most welcome interventions at this fair comes from Liz Magic Laser, who has used her status as the fair's commissioned artist to tweak not just the art world, but the city that trumpets its contribution to urban life. Laser chose to design the T-shirts worn by ubiquitous Armory staff, which proclaim that the average household income of fair visitors is \$334,000 – almost exactly the cutoff for membership in America's under-fire 1%. She's also branded the fair's VIP cards, which inform bearers that they've made it into the inner circle ... along with 12,365 other people.