

TRUE COLORS

# True Colors: The Search for a Center of Gravity at an Ever-Expanding Armory Week

In which the art world tries to cram two years' worth of programming into one scant week.

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BY MICHAEL WEBB/GETTY IMAGES.

**T**he New York City art world this week has been an orgiastic explosion of dinners, openings and parties, with hundreds of galleries opening their biggest shows in two years. While the art market may have been buoyed for most of the pandemic by **ever-richer collectors**, that long slumbering beast that is Armory Week returned for the first time since the pandemic, and reared its head in full roar. But amid all the seven-figure-size fanfare for highfalutin new masters, one thing possibly kind of got lost in the midst of Armory Week: the Armory Show, which had bumped itself from its usual calendar spot in otherwise sleepy March to the primetime, school's-back vibes of post-Labor Day Manhattan. The proceedings made for a somewhat unintended experiment: Does New York's art fair week even need its namesake fair?

"After five years of more fairs, the pendulum reversed itself, and with so many fairs the quality just isn't there," said **Dominique Lévy**, standing in the middle of her gallery's just-opened show of new work by **Mickalene Thomas**. Said gallery, Lévy Gorvy, didn't have a booth in the Armory Show, but she had already sold several of the new works, with prices that ranged from \$400,000 to \$700,000.

“Particularly in America, where you have some of the world’s best museums and galleries, I don’t see a need for art fairs,” said Lévy, who did have a rather obvious interest in the matter, but also may have had a point—at that moment at least. She was speaking after a walkthrough with Thomas at the gallery late Thursday morning, the exact same time that the Armory Show was opening at the Javits Center and the Independent Fair was opening in the financial district. And yet, a few dozen reporters had trekked to the fair-less Upper

East Side rather than make their way to a convention center. Perhaps it helped that Lévy Gorvy—which will soon become LGDR when Lévy and partner **Brett Gorvy** combine their arsenal with those of **Amalia Dayan** and **Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn**—sent attendees off with Thomas-designed umbrellas and a boxed lunch full of goodies from Sant Ambroeus.

The thoughts about how many fairs is too many fairs hung in the air all through a spree of events over the course of the week’s first three days, a dizzying mind fuck of (mostly) mask-on soirees that dotted both sides of Manhattan as well as, at least briefly, Brooklyn. Those collectors not expressly barred from entering the country came in droves to sample the goods in a city with the world’s highest concentration of high-end contemporary art galleries. In a world where small groups can gather in such spaces, with constant opportunity to duck outside and take a mask reprieve, the idea of entering a stuffed convention center, face covered for hours on end, may be somewhat less appealing.

Upon actually arriving at the fair Thursday morning, though, there was a bustle of collectors thumbing phone screens swiping to find proof of vaccine, and the aisles were moderately stuffed with collectors, even some who had managed to get across the pond.

“We have 44 international galleries that were able to get here,” **Nicole Berry**, the Armory’s director, told me in an office floating above the booths. “They have various ways to get here. Directors have U.S. citizenship, or dual citizenship. Some people did the ‘I’m going to Mexico for two weeks thing,’ and to that I said, more power to ‘em.”

As for the problem of everything happening all at one, Berry saw the critical mass as a rising tide that lifts all boats.

“The synergy, it gives people a reason to come to New York,” Berry said. “Most people—though not me!—have had a nice relaxing summer. The exhibitors, so many have said, thank you so much for moving it to September.”

But the tide seems to be especially lifting the galleries, which not only steal eyeballs away from the works at Armory but get to keep inviting bodies into the shows for weeks after.

“We were trying to open as early as possible, and that is this week—not so much thinking about the fairs, really more about maximizing the time for these shows,” said **Marc Payot**, partner at Hauser & Wirth, which opened both a blockbuster Philip Guston show and its first show with young phenom **Avery Singer** Thursday, right as the Armory was opening its doors. “Of course fairs create energy and reasons for people to come, from curators to collectors. That’s definitely positive, but it was not relevant for the decision of when we did these shows.

Singer’s suite of new eight-foot canvases in the column-less fifth-floor gallery includes an abstracted landscape of the shuttered downtown sin den China Chalet, the scene bedecked with crushed cans of White Claw, and it’s one of the biggest primary-market shows this year for Hauser & Wirth, a debut years in the making. The larger works were on sale with the eye-popping price tag of \$1.2 million—at just 34, Singer remains the **most expensive millennial artist** on earth—and that, per Payot, “the interest level is very substantial; it’s not a question if we sell but when we sell.”

Pace spurned the fair and instead chose Thursday to unleash upon Chelsea the first new work by **Robert Longo** since he left his longtime gallery Metro Pictures in advance of its shuttering later this year. Gagosian also wasn’t doing Armory—instead, it staged a stunning show of new gigantic, masterful paintings by newly christened Gago-ite **Kon Trubkovich** that present the spectre of modern Russia through the lens of fraying technology. (Next week, longtime gallery artists **John Currin** and **Nathaniel Mary Quinn** have shows opening at other Gagosian outposts.) While Zwirner did put together a show-stopping booth of new work at the Armory Show, with pieces by **Wolfgang Tillmans** and **Nate Lowman**, it did not skimp on the galleries. Surveys of new work by **Marcel Dzama** and **Lisa Yuskavage** opened alongside a show of Alice Neel’s early works.

Adding to the car crash of a week, Sotheby’s went full diva mode, upstaging both the fair and the galleries by announcing Wednesday, at almost the exact same time the Armory Show was to open, there would be an “historic announcement” made on a “global livestream” beaming out from its York Avenue HQ, a quick black car ride away from the Javits Center. Okay, the announcement was historic if

somewhat expected: The auction house had landed the prize collection of the century thus far, the collection of **Harry and Linda Macklowe**, which a court had ordered be sold as part of their years-long contentious divorce proceedings. The proceeds are to be divvied up between the couple—even though dealers who sold to the couple have said from experience that the collection was largely built by Linda, not Harry. The 65 works from the collection are estimated to sell for upwards of \$600 million, the highest estimate ever given to a single

collection, and on Thursday it was on view at the auction house, giving art lovers another sparkly display of contemporary art to devour other than the fair.

The Armory Show's Thursday opening also put it on a collision course with Independent, a smaller but hipper fair with curated booths by high-taste dealers held this year at the newly opened Casa Cipriani (more on that below). Both opened at the same time, when in the past Independent has opened a day later.

At a dinner the night before the fair, a prominent auction specialist and a big adviser chatted about the next day, which would be simply too busy to accommodate a fair visit; in the bathroom, the auction staffer ran into a former colleague, now at a gallery, and asked if it was true about the private sale of a Picasso for \$100 million, but failed to bring up the Armory Show. The next day, **another adviser tweeted** a screenshot of a text he sent to a colleague: "I'm too busy selling art to actually go to the art fairs."

But perhaps there's an art-fair X factor that the brick-and-mortar galleristas and the world-conquering auction houses can't quite achieve: the element of surprise.

"I ran into **Bernard Lumpkin**, who we did a Zoom with," Berry told me, referring to a leading collector of Black contemporary art. "And when we were talking on Zoom, he said, 'You just can't replicate walking by a booth and discovering something.' And I ran into him and I was like, 'Here we are!' and he was like 'I was right!'"

## The Rundown

*Your crib sheet for comings and goings in the art world this week and beyond...*

...**Marco Brambilla's** new trippy video work *Heaven's Gate*—described by a release as “a time capsule of the Hollywood cinematic landscape” that features **Leonardo DiCaprio, Christopher Walken, Beyoncé**, and more—has been acquired by The Standard, and it will be installed just in time for the hotel's legendary Meta gala party Monday.

...**Reilly Opelka**, the rising U.S. tennis star who **also happens to be a contemporary-art fan**, went on the **podcast *Nota Bene***—hosted by Curatorial Services founder **Benjamin Godsill** and yours truly—to discuss the fallout of the U.S. Open fining him \$10,000 for bringing a tote bag from Tim Van Laere Gallery onto the court.

...**David Totah's** dinner for Wallace Berman at Balvanera on the Lower East Side brought out none other than **Mary Boone**, the art-dealing legend who served hard time from **2019 to 2020**, and is now fully out of house arrest. She sat with rocker-slash-writer **Richard Hell** and the critic **Barry Schwabsky**.

...**Kathleen Ryan's** *Jackie* (2021), the gigantic gem-studded sculpture of a pumpkin that was the centerpiece of her show at Karma earlier this year, has been acquired by the Dallas Museum of Art.

...Work on display at **Julian Schnabel's** show at the Brant Foundation has been acquired by **Andy and Christine Hall**, Amalia Dayan, and **Adam Lindemann**, and of course **Peter Brant** himself—though Schnabel got to keep two of his favorite works.

...**Kendrick Lamar** was **spotted** at Jack Shainman Thursday night seeing **Tyler Mitchell's** first solo show at the gallery.

...The divorce settlement of **Beck** and **Marissa Ribisi** **awarded Ribisi** five works by Banksy, but Beck walked away with only four—sorry, bud!

## Scene Report: Casa Cipriani

The Cipriani brand has been stamping its name on napkins in New York for decades now, so when a new one comes to town it's hardly a novelty. The family has not one but two outposts in the Grand Central vicinity: a banquet hall and a regular gala space on Wall Street. (Plus they earned all the cred they could ever want with Gotham's One Percent by allegedly enlisting the Gotti family **to bust up a union** at its Rockefeller Center restaurant, at least according to a Gambino family member's testimony in 2004. Though **Arrigo Cipriani** said they paid a lawyer, not the Mob, to help with union problems, and Giuseppe Cipriani said the allegations were “**all lies**.”) And so a new Cipriani wasn't treated as the biggest news in Manhattan hospitality—that is, until the art dealers came back to town from the Hamptons. Now, the

just-opened Casa Cipriani, a hotel and members-only club with multiple bars, lounges, boites, and halls on South Street, has arguably become the epicenter of Armory Week, with its harborside views and familiar gilded decor proving to be catnip to lux-lusty art collectors. Plus, it's housed in the beaux arts landmark that is the Battery Maritime Building, which hugs the Hudson in a way that at nighttime *kind of* looks like the Grand Canal view at Harry's Bar in Venice.

On Wednesday, **Emmanuel Perrotin** hosted a dinner at Jazz Bar celebrating its new Georges Mathieu show, with **Joe Nahmad**, of Nahmad Contemporary—the very same Nahmads who reportedly own an **estimated \$1 billion in Picassos** and have galleries around the world. A piano man tickled the ivories as tartar and carpaccio abounded. Service was excellent. Upon asking for a spot for a smoke break, an attendee was brought to an canopied private deck usually reserved for members as a tuxedoed gentleman proffered an extremely large ashtray and a box of matches so big it could only fit in a Birkin.

The next night it became the primary watering hole for the new power brokers of dynastic art-world clans—**Vito Schnabel** held court at one table, **Max Levai** held court at another. A shot of Hollywood mega-wattage was provided by **Kristen Stewart**, who graced the Casa Cipriani terrace Thursday after blitzing, Chanel-clad, through film festivals (those are back too!), showered in praise for her performance in **Pablo Larrain's** Princess Di biopic, *Spencer*. And Friday morning, as the Independent Fair opened the doors to its second day, visitors strolled through the aisles of what's typically the brainiest art fair in town. When a parched fairgoer orders a midday martini, it indeed comes in that iconic no-stem beaker-like glass that they stock in Venice.

Squint and it was Harry's.

And that does it for your Armory Week True Colors. Like what you're seeing? Hate what you're reading? Have a tip? Drop me a line at [nate\\_freeman@condenast.com](mailto:nate_freeman@condenast.com).