

# ARTnews

## ‘It Can Hit Us, But It Won’t Defeat Us’: Armory Show Proves Resilient in Face of Coronavirus Fears and Complications

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*The scene at the Armory Show.*

“Excited?” “Nervous?” “*Purell-ed?*” Greetings and salutations took on curious tones as the **Armory Show** opened Wednesday morning in New York, with art on offer from 182 galleries from 32 countries—and lots of talk of the coronavirus that has made travel and mass assembly a major issue around the globe. No more than a few seconds went by without some kind of mention of it, however serious or nonchalant. After all, New York announced its first confirmed case of the virus just a few days ago. But the spirit of the fair remained expectant, even with uncertainty in the air.

Attendees in the early hours of a warm and sunny pseudo-spring day included lots of familiar faces. Some dealers said they are expecting slightly less attendance than in the past, but just as many said the response they gathered in advance from clients and collectors suggested that art buyers are not cowed. In any case, those walking the aisles in the early hours included Art Basel global director Marc Spiegler, collector Beth Rudin DeWoody, Glenn Lowry from MoMA, Kathy Halbreich from the Robert

Rauschenberg Foundation, artist Maurizio Cattelan, curator couple Massimiliano Gioni and Cecilia Alemani (the latter of whom was recently appointed artistic director of the 2021 Venice Biennale), Thelma Golden from the Studio Museum in Harlem, and designer/actor Waris Ahluwalia, among many others.

Despite all the fears of hosting an art fair at a time when thousands around the world are sick with the coronavirus, business proceeded largely as usual. Just two galleries from the original exhibitor list—Pearl Lam Galleries (Hong Kong and Shanghai) and ShanghART (Beijing, Singapore, and Shanghai), the only enterprises set to participate who operate solely out of China, Hong Kong, and Singapore—didn't wind up showing at the fair in the end. (An Armory Show representative did not confirm whether the coronavirus had been the cause for them dropping out, saying only that both enterprises didn't make the list that was finalized in mid-February. The galleries themselves did not respond to request for comment.) Galleries from Italy, where there have been more than 3,000 documented coronavirus cases, still turned out for the fair, with enterprises such as Galleria Lia Rumma (Milan and Naples), A arte Invernizzi (Milan), and Apalazzogallery (Brescia) running their booths as normal, despite closures in the cities where they're based.

Nicole Berry, the Armory Show's director, said that the fair followed recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and the World Health Organization, offering information about best health practices to visitors at the fair—and more hand sanitizer than usual. Hugs, kisses, and handshakes are frequent sights at art fairs around the world, but fewer were seen on Wednesday, when many people opted instead for elbow bumps to avoid spreading germs. "We put everything in place to take precautions, but the crowds speak for themselves," Berry said. "People are undeterred."



*The scene at the Armory Show.*

Pier 90 opened first, with a focus on curated presentations including those in a Perspectives section devoted to historic work shown through a contemporary lens, to wit, an inspired intermingling of photographs by Nan Goldin and Weegee at the booth for Toronto's Caviar 20 gallery, where decades separated the former's intimate shots of friends and the latter's mix of gruesome news pictures and abstractions from his prescient "Distortion Series." ("When photography was trying to be art, he was doing murders," an attendee said of Weegee while trying to explain his legacy to a companion.)

Also on Pier 90 was the "Focus" section, assembled by ICA Los Angeles curator Jamillah James around the theme of "Another Time, Another Place." Charlie James gallery from Los Angeles brought works by Patrick Martinez and Gabriella Sanchez; James said the turnout early on was strong, and that several works in his booth had already sold, including a mixed-media painting with a neon element by Martinez for \$35,000. "The fair can do its work even without the crowds," James said, noting that he had presold a couple of works that he ended up not bringing for the weekend. As to how people were behaving in the context of the coronavirus, he said, "Some people are still shaking hands. You can't separate yourself from people in this city."

In another "Focus" booth, that of the Brussels gallery Sorry We're Closed, giant paintings of sharks and dragons and cats by Robert Nava elicited wide eyes. Nearby, San Francisco's Hackett Mill had on display on one wall a large wooden alligator sculpture by David Beck, which ended up serving as a backdrop for lots of morning selfies.

Pier 94, which housed the main section, opened at noon, and attendees made their way there past a Disco Tacos vendor outside playing a dance mix of Tina Turner's "What's Love Got to Do with It" at surprisingly loud volume.

Not so far into the aisles was Robert Lazzarini's *police barricade* (2019), a sculpture of a blue wooden barrier swirled into surreal shapes. "He works with original pieces, deforms them mathematically, and reproduces them in the original material," said André Schlechtriem of Dittrich & Schlechtriem gallery from Berlin. "All the scratches are hand-painted and handmade."

Asked what he expects in terms of attendance over the days to come, Schlechtriem said, "We have clients who are very interested and want to see things in person. We have a lot of clients in New York, that's why we like to return here." Asked about the coronavirus, he was a bit less forthcoming. "I'm not going to give you anything," he said, with a laugh. "I think it's ridiculous. You Americans always want to talk about the weather. Let's talk about art, and not any issues."

Nearby, Mariane Ibrahim gallery from Chicago was showing four women artists—ruby onyinyechi amanze, Zohra Opoku, Lina Iris Viktor, and Florine Démosthène—who have featured in the gallery's Armory Show booths in the past. "This is my mini-retrospective,"

said Ibrahim, who purposely presented only solo-artist shows in her first four years at the fair. The works priced between \$17,000 and \$85,000 tell a story of sorts. “I planned at the beginning I would do only female artists,” Ibrahim said, “and at some point would bring them all together. They are my Fantastic Four. They were part of the building of our identity in terms of how inclusive the gallery is and how much we want to show the voices of women.”

About the coronavirus, Ibrahim said, “I have to admit we’ve had a few cancellations for pandemic reasons, from people who don’t want to risk anything. I think this could be an exceptional gathering for people in New York and, after, we’re headed into uncertainty. But now we’re here, we’re standing, we look pretty healthy—and we’ll do as usual. It can hit us, but it won’t defeat us.”

“It seems by the sound and people walking down the aisle that people are here, and a lot of clients said they’re coming,” said David Castillo, in the booth for his namesake gallery from Miami among artwork by three artists— Sanford Biggers, Pepe Mar, and Vaughn Spann—priced between \$15,000 and \$75,000. “I expect it be may be a little less than last year, but it seems like it’s going to be well-attended.” He remains bullish too: “I love the Armory. I’m always surprised each year by new people. There aren’t truly a lot of fairs where you can say that every year you will meet a new person, whether from New York or somewhere else. It also still retains the feeling of a smaller fair. It has an intimate feel—people really stop to engage and talk to you.”

Katie de Tilly, director of 10 Chancery Lane gallery, said there were no complications regarding travel from her home base in Hong Kong. “Painless,” she said. But not completely: “A lot of our flights were canceled and rebooked. Cathay Pacific Airways cut many flights because they just haven’t been able to fill them, so we were shuffling days of arrival.”

Asked about the current coronavirus situation at home, de Tilly said, “Hong Kong is so safe. They really have it under control, because they had SARS before. All the civil servants were at home, all the schools are closed, it’s forced quarantine for anyone coming from China.” As for how reactions in the U.S. compare, she added, “The news is very sensationalist. But I think it would be great if people become more hygienic in general. If we followed the flu the way we’re following the coronavirus, people would be really freaked out.”

In the 10 Chancery Lane booth were works by two Chinese artists—Shi Guorui, based in Catskill, N.Y., since 2014; and Wang Keping, based in Paris since 1984. Photographs by Guorui were especially striking, all of them set in New York’s upstate Hudson River Valley around a project he did with the Thomas Cole Historic Site. “He found the locations where paintings were made and then did his own camera obscura work, directly onto photographic paper,” de Tilly said. “This waterfall picture is from 34 hours of exposure over several days.”



*Shi Guorui, Kaaterskill Falls, Catskill Mountains, New York, 2019. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND 10 CHANCERY LANE GALLERY*

A buzzy booth by Dastan's Basement gallery from Tehran featured bright but moody paintings evoking children's playgrounds by Mehdi Ghadyanloo, an Iranian artist moving soon to the U.S. "He just got a green card," said gallery representative Sheida Ellini. "He became famous with his public murals in the streets of central Tehran. These boxes remind him of the shelters he grew up in as a kid during the Iran-Iraq War. His work is about the juxtaposition of the limitations that Iranians feel and all their hope and joy and love—basic human feelings. People in Iran try to live happily, just like everybody else."

Unfortunately, Dastan's Basement founder Hormoz Hematian wasn't able to travel to New York—because of the coronavirus. "He was in Tehran and has to wait for two weeks because of Mr. Pence's ban," Ellini said of travel restrictions established by Vice President Mike Pence.



*Mehdi Ghadyanloo's The Joy Factory (2020) at Dastan's Basement. COURTESY DASTAN'S BASEMENT*

At the booth for Kayne Griffin Corcoran, a bottle of Purell formed the centerpiece of a table with information about what was on view. "It might make people feel a little more welcome," said Beatrice Shen, the Los Angeles-based gallery's director of sales. Among the works appearing at the fair were standout pieces by two artists who died in the past year, Huguette Caland and Beverly Pepper. The Caland work belied a secret: the canvas contained letters from a past lover. "She wanted to get rid of the letters, but she didn't want to throw them away, so she embedded them into the canvas of the painting," Shen said. By the end of the day, the gallery had sold a few works by Mary Corse for \$280,000, as well as pieces by Rosha Yaghmai, Mika Tajima, Hank Willis Thomas, and Mary Obering.

Talk of sanitizing continued, in a much different way, at the booth of Nicodim Gallery, which has locations in Los Angeles and Bucharest. Among its offerings were two sprawling sculptures made of refuse found in landfills by Moffat Takadiwa. Don't worry about the garbage in the works priced between \$35,000 and \$50,000, though, as Patrick Kellycooper, an associate director at the gallery, said: "He has a multi-step bleaching process before he weaves them together." And prognosticators take note: Jay-Z is apparently planning to place a Takadiwa sculpture at his Roc Nation studios.

Frederik Schampers, a deputy director at Galeria Nara Roesler (with locations in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and New York), said the crowd on the first day was good, with

lots of eyes on two \$100,000 sculptures in Cor-ten steel by Raul Mourão. “The first thing people have been figuring out is whether or not to shake hands and kiss—and they’re mostly doing elbow bumps,” Schampers said. “[But] after 15 minutes, everyone’s been on the same page and it’s been business as usual.”

A representative at Vistamare gallery with locations in Milan and Pescara, Italy, described the way the media has been portraying the outbreak in Milan as “dramatic.” In the booth for Tang Art, Vivian Har, the gallery’s Hong Kong–based executive director, said, “In Hong Kong, everyone is highly alert about coronavirus, wearing masks, washing their hands, using sanitizer.” As for New York, she was working to sell floor sculptures by Beijing-based artist Zhao Zhao for \$14,000 to \$54,000. Tang Art showed similar versions of the works at last year’s Art Basel Hong Kong, and when asked about the cancellation of that fair last month, Har said it was “the right decision.”

One highlight of the fair is a 32-piece work of filmstrips in glass by late filmmaker Jonas Mekas, on offer at Apalazzogallery from Brescia, Italy. The work has three editions, with the first being sold as a complete set for \$260,000. And San Francisco’s Haines Gallery had four works by the late Iranian artist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian ranging from \$50,000 to \$375,000.

In James Cohan Gallery’s booth, a painting by Firelei Báez of a burst of colorful paint atop a map from the mid-19th century was on reserve for \$170,000, while a 1963 piece by Lee Mullican that had been exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1965 was going for \$225,000.

Houston’s Sicardi Ayers Bacino had numerous pieces on offer by Liliana Porter, including one that was in the artist’s recent traveling retrospective. That sculpture of a small figure surrounded by a large bundle of pink fabric and thread was on offer for \$50,000.

And Mexico City’s Proyectos Monclova had a work by Chantal Peñalosa—made up of 18 inkjet prints that comprise diptychs of the sky—on offer for \$25,000. To make the piece, Peñalosa photographed the same cloud from each side of the U.S.-Mexico border, about 15 minutes apart. Laura Martínez, a director at the gallery, said the work poses a set of questions: “What is a border? What does it mean to have political lines drawn, dividing the land, while in the sky it is all the same?”