



Whitehot at The 2023 Armory Show: When Size Matters

By J. SCOTT ORR September 7, 2023

Closing out its third decade, The Armory Show, the unrivaled cornerstone of the art world's fall season, opens to the public Friday with its biggest and most diverse line-up ever, proving once again the resilience of the global art market.

Thousands of artists, gallerists, collectors and others descended on the Javitz Center for Thursday's VIP preview to sample what's new in the contemporary art world and to take the market's temperature. Tens of thousands are expected to follow when the show opens to the public on Friday.

From its humble beginnings as the Gramercy International Art Fair in 1994, The Armory Show has outgrown a series of locations, including the 69th Regiment Armory for which it is named. Its name is also a nod to the 1913 Armory Show, which introduced early titans of modern art – Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cezanne, Picasso, Matisse, and Duchamp, to name a few – to American audiences for the first time. Today, it is the singularly significant U.S. fall art event and one of the most important worldwide.

The 2023 show is the first since The Armory was acquired by the London-based publishing and art fair giant Frieze, which can now boast peerless art fair eminence in the world's largest art market with Frieze New York in the spring and The Armory Show in the fall.

This year's iteration of The Armory Show, the third to be held at Manhattan's 3.3 million square foot colossus the Javitz Center, is made vital by the work of some 800 artists, represented by 225 galleries from 35 countries. Here are a few highlights:

Se Oh, a South Korean-born American artist, unites beauty and rage in a collection of porcelain sculptures, including a gripping piece called *Purge*, which presents at first glance as a delicate beige vase that is in essence a rounded decorative vessel that could hold, I don't know, an artist's soul. A closer look reveals that its inner space is protected by sharp, dangerous, flowing fin-like protrusions like those that might provide aegis to a fish or a dragon.

Adopted by a white Tennessee couple at nine months old, Se Oh grew up in America's deep south where the challenges of entrenched racism led to isolation and anger: "I internalized these experiences from a very young age which manifested in anger and resentment," he said.

Se Oh's work succeeds in translating that anger into delicate, yet strong and embracing porcelain works that use contradiction – anger and beauty, scorched volcanic glazes and pretty patterns – to contemplate the divides that challenge Asian-Americans and by extension all minorities.

"The act of opening up these vessels and exposing something new and vulnerable within is both revealing and an act of resilience," said Se Oh, whose work is presented by Half Gallery, the small but influential gallery located in New York's East Village and Los Angeles.

Allana Clarke is a Detroit-based Trinidadian-American artist whose work *Noone* is a transcendent three-dimensional, free-formed sculpture in shiny black that expresses the bitterness, embarrassment and pain felt by Black Americans forced to deal with latent anti-Blackness in American society.

The piece is one of a series created from Salon Pro 30 Sec. Super Hair Bond Glue, a product commonly used to affix hair extensions to people's scalps. The pieces were created over a period of days or weeks, during which Clarke wrestled with the substance to instill it with meaning and significance beyond anything contemplated by the product's creators, or its users.

An art professor at Detroit's Wayne State University whose work also veers into video, performance, sculpture, and text, Clarke has been an artist in residence at the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, The Vermont Studio Center, Lighthouse Works, and Yaddo and her work has been shown globally.

Clarke's work comes to The Armory Show via the Liberty Street Collective, a Detroit-based community organization devoted to sharing art, empowering artists, and contributing to the city's artistic renaissance.

The Debate (One Million BC – One Million AD) represents the realization of a long-delayed vision of 92-year-old Hungarian-born American conceptual artist Agnes Denes.

Originally created in 1969, the piece included a pair of miniature skeletons, seated at a table, facing off against each other in conversation while bathed in a rose-colored light.

With an assist from 3-D digital printing, Denes' vision has finally come to life, the once diminutive skeletons rendered life-size for the first time. Contained in a mirrored box and illuminated by LED lighting, the newly-monumental piece is a timeless reminder of man's abiding humanity, the ceaseless endurance of the species, and the folly of devoting resources to fleeting, temporal debate.

The New-York-based Denes is an important figure among the conceptual artists who came to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition to sculpture, she has worked in a wide range of media including drawings, poetry and philosophical writings. She was a pioneer of ecological art through her iconic land art works.

The piece is presented by the Beverly-Hills-based Marc Selwyn Fine Art and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects of New York.

Prada Marfa, is a 2020 photograph by James Evans, but it is so much more. It is a West Texas work of art that depicts another West Texas work of art in a way only a proud West Texan could.

The picture takes a pop art approach to a lonely Prada boutique made small by the vastness of the Texas sky and a naked landscape that extends to small mountains on the horizon. The work is about scale; excess; natural, versus manmade, beauty; America's super-sized place in the world and the inconsequence of high-end commercialism.

Prada Marfa, the subject of the photograph, not the photograph itself, is likewise a work of art worthy of note. Constructed in 2005 by the Danish/Norwegian artistic duo of Elmgreen & Dragset, the work consists of a life-size model of a Prada boutique installed in the desert along a

desolate section of Interstate 90 near the town of Valentine (pop-127). The installation's use of the Prada logo has the imprimatur of the luxury brand's founder Miuccia Prada, who donated shoes and bags for the project.

The piece is presented by Ballroom Marfa, which for two decades has served up art to the 2,000 residents of the town of Marfa and others from a 1920s-era ballroom. Evans is a resident of nearby Marathon, Texas, whose work hews toward traditional landscapes, nature photography and portraits, and includes two books *Big Bend Pictures*, 2003; and *Crazy from the Heat*, 2011.

Shinique Smith is a Brooklyn-based artist who has a fondness for bright colors, found objects, audacious stylistic mergers, clashing patterns and bold expressions of emotional themes and reflective story-telling.

Take *Love at the End of an Era*, a work in acrylic, ink, crayon, fabric, and ribbon on canvas. The piece may be about the end of an era, but it's got a big bang feel to it with its center exploding in a clash between light and darkness. Angry black strokes on the right side of the canvas fight to suppress the natural shades swirling about on the left side. Some brightly colored pieces of ribbon, a planet-earth-like spindle of yarn, and an embroidered fabric patch join in on the lightness team.



Love at the End of an Era by Shinique Smith. Photo by Jamie Lubetkin

Across her oeuvre, Smith's work is similarly bipolar. Her work can be chaotic and violent, or sprightly and playful; it can at once be graceful and gawky, severe and cartoonish. But her recent work is always complex, animated and noisy.

Smith's work was among that offered at The Armory Show by Miami's David Castillo Gallery. A native of Baltimore, Smith's work has been exhibited in museums and galleries across the country, including The Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery and The Corcoran Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C.; the Bronx Museum, the Brooklyn Museum and the New Museum in New York; among many others.

Modeled on California's Zodiac Killer, who has eluded capture since killing at least five people in the late 1960s, Andrew Maughan's character The Great Assassin wears a hooded mask made of black hair, with mirrored aviator shades and is frequently seen smoking a cigarette. Adding a frightening extra dimension to the otherwise clownish Assassin, his shades are cut out of the canvas so his eyes are both present and missing.

Unlike the Zodiac, the Great Assassin has been seen many times: driving a car, lurking passively in the darkness, standing in the woods, wearing plaid, eating an ice cream bar and in other anodyne situations hardly fitting for a serial killer. And perhaps that's the point, the cartoonish Great Assassin could be anyone, the guy next door, a Sunday school teacher, that weirdo in your head.

At The Armory Show, Maughan's Assassin shows up on a geometric, lighted plane, sort of like an airport landing strip. As always, the Assassin is doing nothing, just standing there looking back, reflexively, from behind those all-concealing shades. It's kinda terrifying the way he just exists, fearless and unbowed in passive anonymity.

Maughan is a London-based artist who studied at the Royal Academy Schools, and Northumbria University. His work is presented by London's Jack Bell Gallery. **WM**