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In Blue-Chip Precincts, a Shout-Out for the Undersung

Booths Devoted to Women Multiply at the Art Show

By KAREN ROSENBERG MARCH 6, 2014

In catering to established tastes, art fairs tend to mirror or even exacerbate the art world's imbalances. And of all the art fairs that visit New York in March, the Art Show, organized by the Art Dealers Association of America, is normally the safest and most blue-chip of the bunch (that is, heavily white and male).

But the 26th edition of the fair is in some respects a corrective. Perhaps mindful of the special section of drawings by female artists at the Armory Show across town, the association's member dealers have assembled one formidable booth after another of art by women: 13 of the 38 solo presentations, plus a thematic exhibition, "Women Collagists," at Pavel Zoubok. That's not exactly gender parity; percentage-wise, it's comparable to the lineup for the current Whitney Biennial, which suggests that there's plenty of room for improvement. But it's the highest number of female solos to date for the Art Show.

Quality may be more persuasive than quantity: Nearly every one of those booths is a knockout. Great care has been taken by dealers in calling attention to undersung historical material and to contemporary artists presenting brand-new work. Yes, this is also true of many male-artist booths at the fair, which has become known in recent years for the quality of its solo presentations. (Jeff Wall's early light boxes at Marian Goodman and Phillip Taaffe's new botanical paintings at Luhring Augustine are among the polished, tightly edited offerings, as is the pairing of Louise Bourgeois and Gaston Lachaise at Cheim & Read.) But in many places, you can sense extra effort by or on behalf of women.

The historical shows are particularly stirring, reaching back as far as the 19th century to recover underappreciated female artists and prompt some sustained thought about the challenges they faced. Galerie St. Etienne, for instance, is featuring the early German Modernist painter Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907), who is the subject of a new biography by the art historian Diane Radycki. Looking at her semi-abstracted portraits of mothers and children, which evoke both the Post-Impressionists and Piero della Francesca, you wonder what else she might have accomplished had she not died at 31 from complications of childbirth.

Also riveting is the Robert Miller Gallery's survey of Lee Krasner's dynamic collages, which make use of her own torn-up drawings. Many are as large as her better-known paintings, and every bit as gestural. It ought to be seen in tandem with "Women Collagists," which includes smaller works by Grace Hartigan, Vanessa German and Perle Fine.

P.P.O.W.'s thorough and absorbing show of older works by a living artist, Martha Wilson, should also be counted among the important historical exhibitions. The photographs, performance documents and films on view date from 1970 to 1974, when Ms. Wilson was attending art school in Halifax, Nova Scotia. They find her exposing chauvinism and clubbiness within this conceptual-art center, sometimes posing as a man in drag, and always with wry humor.

In the adjacent booth of Carl Solway Gallery, the installation artist Ann Hamilton (who not long ago filled the Park Avenue Armory's entire drill hall) is in residence, engaging visitors with the sort of interactive project that's become common at contemporary fairs like Frieze (coming to New York in May) and at the Armory, but that is rare here. Visitors who want to be photographed by Ms. Hamilton can press their faces against a special membrane; only the features that touch the screen will appear in focus. Anyone who participates will receive a small print bearing a portrait.

Sarah McEneaney is also present, in a sense, at Tibor de Nagy; in her precise and colorful egg-tempera paintings, she can be seen lounging with her cats, striking yoga poses in a James Turrell installation and doing the crossword in an art-filled red interior (a riff, perhaps, on Matisse's "Red Studio.")

Younger contemporary artists (some already veterans of multiple Chelsea gallery shows — this is the tried-and-tested Association of Art Dealers, after all) also make an impression. Sara VanDerBeek has put together an elegant and mysterious installation inspired by urban transformation in Cleveland; photographs partly obscured by a zigzagging partition show us mysterious details of the cityscape.

At Petzel Gallery, the painter Dana Schutz is showing a new and vigorous crop of charcoal drawings. With their whirling, mechanized figures, they seem to converse with the Futurist works on paper just two stalls away at Adler & Conkright.

And at Yancey Richardson, the South African photographer Zanele Muholi's black-and-white portraits portray individuals boldly asserting both their African and lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender identities. They remind you that while the Art Show may be moving in the right direction as far as the gender gap is concerned, a fair that shows the art world its better self would also have to address diversity.

The Art Show continues through Sunday at the Park Avenue Armory, 643 Park Avenue, at 67th Street; artdealers.org.

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