

FOUNTAIN ART FAIR

69TH ARMORY BUILDING | MARCH 7 – MARCH 9, 2014

BY MARGARET GRAHAM

It is a rare and refreshing thing for inclusiveness to give an art fair its edge; somewhere between quality and quantity, variety and uniformity, a careful balance must be struck. Over the past eight years, the Fountain Art fair has set itself apart from its larger, upmarket counterparts like the Armory by manifesting just this type of catch all, D.I.Y. ethos. Alas, as inclusiveness would imply, the bulk of the artwork found at Fountain is neither rare nor refreshing but rather exactly what you'd expect: eager but unremarkable. Still, there are exceptions nestled into the fray, and the challenge of discovering them is half the fun.

Crammed into the 80-sum-odd booths built under the soaring barrel vault ceiling of the 69th Armory—which vary in size from closet to pool hall—one might find all manner of trinkets and treasures: paint-by-number chic, anthropomorphic object, crafty kitsch reaching on tip-toe toward the ledge of fine art (or is it fine art slumming as craft?), glossy digitization and hodgepodge collage, meticulous realism, and ersatz abstraction. OF LANDSCAPE and the Wicker Park Bocce Club even collaborated to dress up their space as a gallery-cum-bocce-court-cum-cocktail-bar. For the most part the art, like the layout of the fair itself, emulates its more commercial and established predecessors. Around each corner wait a few more aspiring Basquiats, wittily political graffiti, Ligon or Emin-esque neon exclamations, and an impressive abundance of Hirstian skull motifs rendered on every surface imaginable. The tone however is decidedly modest, and seems happy to be; those works that at first glance might read as ordinary or immature often also reveal themselves as delightfully unpretentious, and terrifically *personal*. And given that exhibitors include single artists, collectives, international galleries, non-profit organizations, and collaborative partnerships, the artist is frequently present and glad to engage, creating an overall atmosphere of bonhomie and mutual exchange. If you are patient enough to comb through the muck to get to the meat, the experience of meandering is a rewarding one.

Compelling games rendered in less conventional mediums are easiest to spot. The surreal, monastic pastel drawings of Hungarian artist József Buhály are bizarrely captivating, placing diaphanous Reaper-like figures in compositions borrowed from Renaissance portraiture and de Chirico rendered in lush palettes of sunset and dusk. Hugh O'Rourke's "100 Reds" offers a sly blend of post-Pop and blasé Americana, consisting of 100 empty packs of Marlboro Reds, in various states of disrepair, tacked to the wall in a symmetrical grid. The effect is reminiscent of a flag, one that is essentially made of garbage and yet waves for every cowboy, budding artist, and bum from N.Y.C. to L.A. Similarly clever is Chuck VonSchmidt's installation entitled "Brussels Sprout," which features a life-size wooden mannequin, presumably male, "peeing" into the base of a fake plant; the thin stream of water that projects from the dummy's wooden spout is endless, as are the implications of the artist's slogan, cheekily tattooed on the dummy's butt: "Cogito ergo ars" [I think, therefore I (make) art]. Other gems include Lisa Sanders's "Arcs & Rods" at Sculptors Guild and Cidgem Tankut's cellular wall sculptures of coiled, multicolored fabric, hidden amongst the chaotic and overfilled booth of the Hullabaloo Collective.

Notable artists working in more traditional, 2-D formats are peppered across the room, tending to hang their work in dense, salon-style schemes. One wall teems with no less than 75 paintings by multimedia artist Dave Tree, depicting popular Internet memes in all their crass and neon glory. In a booth nearby, a horde of creatures



Performance piece, Friday March 7, 2014, curated by Analog/Analogue. Photo by author.

and dreamscapes by painter Scott Michael Ackerman pause and prance like morbid yet endearing mash-ups of Lane Smith illustrations and Francis Bacon, set against the striking backdrop a blood red wall. The faux tiger rug that adorns the floor below adds an additional dash of character. The collection of work presented by local artist Petra Nimtz recalls the soft, rounded gestures of Helen Frankenthaler in her Ab-Ex inspired canvases, though Nimtz's palette of muted grays and earth tones imbues the work with a calmer, more solid disposition.

Rather than reaching for the monumental or shocking, most of the Fountain artists aim for intimacy, as though the smaller, the better. Brandon Friend and Jason Douglas Griffin, the duo behind the collaborative entity "Gentleman's Game," put forth a number of mixed media works from their current Atlantic series, the most arresting of which are the 2 by 3 inch framed prints of power plants and amusement park rides depicted in a dilapidated future state, either drowned in ocean swells or otherwise reclaimed by nature. From the tiny 3-D printed figurines by Leon Reid IV and Bob Clyatt to the minuscule portraits and impossibly thin cursive lettering posted on cigarette filters inside old Hermes boxes at Gitler & _____, works all over the fair prove that little can pack a big punch. Of course, the quality of materials and scale of these works no doubt reflect the size of their maker's pockets, most of whom are early career artists, or have spurned the scene to pursue a more noncommercial kind of creativity.

Another element of the fair that remains less tractable is the periodic performances curated by Grace Exhibition Space and AnalogAnalogue. The productions and roster of participants vary over the three days, leaving room for a welcome bit of mischief to sneak in. On the afternoon of Friday, March 7th, a bald, bearded man stood toward the back of a large and otherwise empty elevated stage reading selections from some sort of art theory diatribe into a microphone. In the center of the audience stood a stack of crates of big, juicy tomatoes; the rules of the game were unclear but periodically whispered through the gathering crowd. *I hear it's \$1 if you want to throw to miss and free if you throw to hit*, one onlooker said. *This is ridiculous*, another said, *but I kind of want to do it*, hand outstretched. It only took a minute for a line to form, and for the stage to become a mess of pulpy starbursts. More and more, people began aiming to hit the reader, who clipped—or no, soldiered on, nonplussed; but he was no longer the object of the audience's attention. The piece became about the transformation, about watching the debauched pleasure people would get from the chance to throw something at a complete stranger, and the moan that escaped them when they missed. ☞