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The Bare Essentials of Armory Art Week

Peter Duhon and Alexandra Peers

Artist Sebastian Bremer bobbed on his heels, preening, at the start of the Armory Show in New York Wednesday. The next day, his show at Edwyn Houk Gallery was set to open, with pieces priced about \$30,000 to \$65,000—but the gallery had told him it was already more than half-sold. "I have money in my pocket," he bragged, over the soft buzzing of artist Ivan Navarro's electrified fence nearby (a hit for the Paul Kasmin Gallery at \$11,000 per neon section).

Armory Week. The suspense was huge, the uniform was black, the Champagne was free, and at the parties, it sometimes seemed like every can of black-light paint and performance artist/stripper in the city were spoken for.

More than 600 galleries from around the world took booths, corners or stands at 13 art fairs last week, while a couple dozen more Chelsea galleries opened exhibitions. As the dust settles, it looks like sales were reasonable and the turnout was tremendous, with events drawing lots of the major collectors, curators and scenesters; Jonathan and Lizzie Tisch; Museum of Modern Art director Glenn Lowry; David Tieger; Aby Rosen; Agnes Gund; Mera and Don Rubell; Donald Marron; Tony Goldman; Michael Ovitz; and Big Love-er Chloë Sevigny. Designer Cynthia Rowley with her husband, gallerist Bill Powers, strolled the Armory Show. (He wished us "Happy Arti-Gras!")

People bought, but the ceiling on most purchases was about \$75,000, a splurge rather than a commitment for this very monied set. And the wares on view were different: no shock art, little video, no "sex" in art unless you count the many half-naked people employed to strip, dance or even pee at events to add an air of the risqué. Stalls were hung with fewer multiples (which were the big sellers two years ago, at the worst of the recession), fewer photographs, less portraiture, less Warhol and Pop Art-influenced work overall. Perhaps most strikingly, political art and pictures of Barack Obama, a leitmotif of 2008, with images of him in mediums ranging from paint to breakfast cereal, were nonexistent.

The quickest sales of the week were for name artists by name dealers. David Zwirner, showing Alice Neel at the AADA fair, had a trio of sales by the end of it, at prices ranging from \$500,000 to \$850,000. Uptown also, Pace Gallery bet the farm, or its whole booth, on the small-scale ash-on-linen paintings by Zhang Huan. The works were priced between \$75,000 and \$100,000. "Forget the first day; we sold out at the opening," said Pace's Andrea Glimcher. Larry Gagosian didn't even bother to rent a booth at either of the fairs, but sold out his Chelsea show of works by Rudolf Stingel and had perhaps the week's swankiest party for the opening of his spectacular Kazimir Malevich (and friends) show uptown. The Malevich show came with a savvy sales pitch: It argues that the Russian Constructivist master was a key influence on such artists as Ed Ruscha and Cy Twombly. This is a very good way to

sell Ruschas and Twomblys to deep-pocketed Russians.

It may seem like the circus has been here forever, but the gargantuan Armory Show, which claims to draw about 60,000 people over five days, is a New York teenager. It began in the (then-rundown) Gramercy Hotel in 1994, started by dealers who couldn't afford, or couldn't get into, the Art Dealers Association of America Fair on Park Avenue, but who still wanted to reach the collectors who streamed into town for it. Dealers simply rented out hotel rooms and hung the work they brought on walls, laid it on beds, staged installations in the hotel bathrooms, screened video art by artists like Tony Oursler in the closets. (One piece was famously cleaned up and packed away by a hotel maid.) One year, early on, Tracey Emin, later to become a Brit art superstar, lounged on the bed and talked about her sex life with potential buyers. Works by her and Damien Hirst sold for under \$10,000 apiece; Charles Saatchi sent his curator. It was so successful that it now stretches over two piers on the Hudson, attracts 270 dealers from around the world and is owned by a Chicago conglomerate that also owns that city's Merchandise Mart, which is run by a Kennedy (Chris, Bobby's son). This year, the ADAA fair actually moved dates to be nearer to the Armory Show.

Dozens of galleries came from Europe and Latin American to these fairs; many said they found it worth it. "It's been a good week," said Isabella Maidment of London's Pilar Corrias Gallery. Her gallery brought work to the fair ranging from \$3,000 to \$75,000. For the past three years, it has been difficult to sell young or unknown artists, but this time collectors were willing to take chances if the unknowns were cheap enough. "We sold all nine of Mary Ramsden's painting for \$3,500 apiece. She's still a student at the Royal Academy of Arts in London," she continued. "Better this year than last year, generally; seems to be a good turnout, collector-wise, very healthy."

Not long into the blitz, Lehmann Maupin Gallery had sold most of the tiny artworks that lined their booth by Brits Gilbert and George. They consisted of postcards of London's tourist and sex attractions, each priced at about \$25,000. Bortolami and Brooklyn's Pierogi also reported sales almost right off the bat. Behemoth Sperone Westwater saw Otto Piene's *Nachtsonne* (The Moon Upon Which It Depends) sell for \$400,000 opening day at the Park Avenue Armory.

Better uptown or down? More than ever, galleries hedged their bets, often exhibiting at both fairs simultaneously. One example was Marianne Boesky, who exhibited at the ADAA fair on Park Avenue (with works priced at \$50,000 to \$1 million) and the Armory by the Piers (most art there, save for a Yoshitomo Nara sculpture, was under \$60,000). Greenberg van Doren, too, took multiple booths.

But conspicuous consumption seemed out, and perhaps the gallery reports were a little too upbeat? The collectors we cornered, by and large, denied having purchased much. "I bought a bottle of water," said Larry Warsh, one of the world's biggest buyers of Chinese contemporary art.