

## ART FAIR REVIEW

# The Armory Show, in a Back-to-School Edition

Art fairs come early, tailoring their calendars to compete with the city's big fall gallery and museum exhibitions. A critic's 11 favorite booths.

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It's back to school in the art world. The fall season, historically characterized by a deluge of new exhibitions, now includes art fairs that have tailored their schedules to coincide with the first wave of gallery and museum openings. The Armory Show, the mega-fair making its third fall appearance at the Javits Center, offers 225 galleries from 35 countries, a far cry from its humble beginnings in 1994 with art works propped on the beds at the Gramercy Hotel. (But even mega-fairs can be absorbed by larger entities: In July, London-based Frieze acquired the Armory Show and Expo Chicago.)

The current Armory Show also boasts a curriculum of live talks, offsite installations and even a curatorial leadership summit that gives the impression of an academic conference. The purpose of the fairs remains commerce and bolstering market values, though. So there is a lot of painting, that perennially sellable commodity. Surrealism and Cubism are touchstones here and figurative painting dominates. Amid the sea of purchasable wares, however, are some extraordinary stories, histories and insights. While last year's fair skewed toward Latin America, this year Indigenous artists are everywhere, and the overview is global. Here are a handful among the many booths that deserve mention, even if you're only window shopping.

## Jean Shin (Platform, 11)



Jean Shin's "Huddled Masses," 2020, center, presented by Praise Shadows Art Gallery, features three outcroppings inspired by scholar's rocks in Zen gardens. James Estrin/The New York Times

The artist Jean Shin with a detail of “Huddled Masses.” James Estrin/The New York Times

Platform is a lozenge-shaped area in the middle of the fair given over to projects organized by the curator Eva Respini under the theme “Rewriting Histories.” A standout here, presented by Boston’s Praise Shadows Art Gallery, is Jean Shin’s “Huddled Masses” (2020), which features three outcroppings inspired by scholar’s rocks in Zen gardens. Look closer though and the rock-forms are encrusted with mobile phones from the last 20 years, surrounded by a mangle of computer cables. Where traditional scholar’s rocks and Zen gardens promoted mental and spiritual clarity, here your mind wanders to e-waste (which is what Shin’s materials actually are) and what it means to meditate in an age of endless distraction.

**Artists Space (Booth N10)**



Drake Carr, in his installation, a booth outfitted to resemble a cozy capsule-size New York apartment. James Estrin/The New York Times

Over at the nonprofit Artists Space, Drake Carr will be drawing friends and family in a booth outfitted to resemble a cozy capsule-size New York apartment. Carr's work customarily involves what he calls "Housecalls": drawing and painting his subjects in their habitats. Here, his invited portrait sitters will bring personal items to include in the drawings. Since Carr is inspired by fashion illustration and many of his subjects are in the fashion industry, a common thread running through his work concerns what people wear and how that shapes identity and community.

### **56 Henry (Booth P36)**





A work by LaKela Brown at 56 Henry Gallery. James Estrin/The New York Times

Nearby is another local artist and gallery, LaKela Brown at 56 Henry, with sculptures and wall reliefs that use sly humor to celebrate and memorialize African American history and hip-hop culture. Stark white plaster and resin are used to cast corn, okra, collard greens and jewelry like rope chains and chunky “door knocker” earrings. When Brown titles them “African/American Still Life,” the allusion to art history is solidified but the unpainted white plaster sculptures also have a deadpan delivery, as if the life were sucked out of the vegetables.

**Patel Brown (Booth F12)**





“Becoming,” 2023, by Rajni Perera and Marigold Santos at Patel Brown. James Estrin/The New York Times

It’s hard to miss the giant earth-colored figure crawling out of the Canadian gallery Patel Brown’s booth. Made of polymer clay, synthetic hair and other materials, the humanoid creature wears a mask — or perhaps its face is a mask. Made by Marigold Santos and Rajni Perera, the sculpture suggests deities and mythological figures from the artists’ cultures (Santos is from the Philippines and Perera from Sri Lanka), as well as life-changing experiences like motherhood. In their hands, art also becomes a place to create hybrids or new “Indigenous” sprites and spirits, drawing from imagined, imperiled or lost ones.

**Zielinsky (Booth F28)**



“On ice,” 1978, photographs by Vera Chaves Barcellos at Zielinsky. James Estrin/The New York Times

Among the solid historical presentations this fall are the performance photographs of a Brazilian artist, Vera Chaves Barcellos, at the Barcelona gallery Zielinsky, in the Focus section of the fair curated by Candice Hopkins. Barcellos’s “On ice” (1978) series captures the artists Flávio Pons and Cláudio Goulart whirling around on a frozen lake in Amsterdam, while “Keep Smiling” (1977) is a grid of photographs featuring the artist and her friends with identity tags hung around their necks. Residing somewhere between portraits and mug shots, the project commented on how to survive under the military dictatorship in Brazil.

### **Nature Morte (Booth 218)**



“Iris” by Sagarika Sundaram at Nature Morte. James Estrin/The New York Times

Nature Morte is the well-regarded New Delhi gallery started by the American artist Peter Nagy over two decades ago. The booth has a healthy roundup of his stable of artists — often a boring fair format — but which offers a window into new art in India. Of particular note is a gorgeous wall hanging by Sagarika Sundaram, “Iris” (2023), made of wool, silk and bamboo silk. Fiber arts have been in the spotlight in recent years — along with ceramics and other media historically considered “craft” — and Sundaram’s lush composition, mimicking the folds of a flower, is an excellent example of why sewn, woven, knotted and knitted objects hold such interest, particularly in an age when “software” generally means something cold and digital.

### **Fridman Gallery (Booth F15)**

“Bikongo-Ifa: Spirit of the Being,” 2020, by Milford Graves at Fridman Gallery. James Estrin/The New York Times

I will profess to being a Milford Graves fanatic. The late jazz percussionist, artist and Bennington professor — a native of Queens, New York — was a visionary who invented his own martial art called Yara, based on praying mantis movements, African dance and the Lindy Hop. His assemblage at Fridman Gallery, “Bikongo-Ifá: Spirit of the Being” (2020) includes tabla drums, an acupuncture model, an African Nkondi figure, computer monitors showing heart readings — and a whole lot of other curious stuff. Graves is paired with Remy Jungerman, whose collage-paintings mix patterns drawn from Surinamese Maroon culture with 20th-century modernist planes and grids.

### **Ingleby Gallery (Booth 419)**

Paintings by Lorna Robertson, at Ingleby Gallery James Estrin/The New York Times

And then there was more painting. How to choose between the hundreds, maybe even thousands of canvases here? Lorna Robertson’s paintings at Ingleby Gallery of Edinburgh stand out because they are bright, playful, colorful — and commandingly large. But they are also smart, taking a century and a half of revolutionary art — including Impressionist pastels and expressionist gestures and drips, Symbolist dreaminess and oddball feminist stridency (think Florine Stettheimer or Jutta Koether) — and sticking them into a blender. What comes out is bold but approachable. It draws you in, then whips you around a little bit.

### **Maruani Mercier (Booth 401)**

“Flower Boy 3,” 2023, by Kwesi Botchway at Maruani Mercier. James Estrin/The New York Times

The Black model in figurative painting has been one of the reigning modes of the last decade. (The Obama portraits were the tip of the iceberg.) A good example in this context is Kwesi Botchway at the Belgian gallery Maruani Mercier.

Botchway’s dramatic “Flower Boy” (2023) series of paintings contrast dark skin with deep red backgrounds, lips and eyes. The young man in the paintings, holding a fragile spray of flowers, looks at turns peaceful and demonically possessed — an apt depiction of paradoxical youth perhaps, but also a potential comment on the politics of race and representation.

**Charlie James Gallery (Booth S8)**

Works by Narsiso Martinez, at Charlie James Gallery. James Estrin/The New York Times

Farmworkers are the primary subjects of the Oaxaca-born, California-based Narsiso Martinez's paintings on cardboard boxes at the Los Angeles gallery Charlie James. Their humanity, individuality and warmth are particularly highlighted. Martinez plays around with art-historical references too: saints' halos in religious paintings are echoed in golden bar codes framing the heads; a still life is served up as a fruitful offering by a smiling figure. Painted on shipping boxes for bananas, there's also a sense of the absurd embedded within his poignant activism.

### **Martin Art Projects (Booth P27)**

"Red and White Rose," 2023, by Salah Elmur at Martin Art Projects. James Estrin/The New York Times

Then there is the Sudan-born, Cairo-based artist Salah Elmur, whose back story is almost as captivating as his haunting Cubo-Surrealist paintings on view at the Cape Town gallery Martin Art Projects. Elmur's father had a photography business in Khartoum and his family possesses an archive of approximately 20,000 photographs from which he draws his subjects — often the “degraded” photos with double exposures and other flaws. Next to one painting, “Red and White Rose” (2023), is a corresponding photograph of two women. The canvas itself is an oasis of calm and gentle connection, a reminder that painting can serve this purpose in places of tumult, whether war-torn countries or commercial art fairs.

### **The Armory Show**

Opens to the public Friday through Sunday, Javits Center, 429 11th Avenue, Manhattan, (212) 645-6440; [thearmoryshow.com](http://thearmoryshow.com).

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