

HYPERALLERGIC MAY 6, 2021

MEH, FRIEZE IS BACK

by Valentina Di Liscia and Hakim Bishara



Mungo Thomson, "SNOWMAN" (2020), painted bronze, at Karma's booth.

A group of gallerists toasted the end of the first day of Frieze New York by pouring champagne into their empty Perrier cans ("We couldn't bring cups," one explained.) After a long pandemic hiatus, the fair's New York edition is back, pared down to 60 exhibitors instead of the usual 150 or so, to ensure social distancing. It's also being held at the Shed, the mammoth multidisciplinary arts center in Hudson Yards, Manhattan, instead of the fair's usual haunt, the nightmare-to-access but lovingly quirky Randall's Island.

After some jockeying, our very own staff writers, Hakim Bishara and Valentina Di Liscia, managed to snag passes for opening day of this year's show — a feat in and of itself, given the fair's super-limited capacity. Scroll below for their on-the-ground reports.

My trip to Frieze started at a North Brooklyn clinic that offers walk-in rapid COVID-19 testing. (Negative Rapid test results, obtained no more than 24 hours prior to visiting, or proof of full vaccination from 14 days or more were required this year). I had just recovered from a taxing second COVID-19 shot, hoping that I'd finally be done with all COVID-related clinic visits, but there I was, getting swabbed once more for art's sake. "I've never been to the Shed," I disclose, making small talk. "It seems like a place for rich people," the

paramedic says with hesitation while swirling a nose swab inside my nostrils. “It definitely is,” I replied. —Hakim Bishara

In addition to following official COVID-19 guidelines, Frieze enforced a series of measures that ranged from prudent to comical. Several dealers mentioned that they were required to “quarantine the art” for 72 hours before it could be installed in the booths (“It’s absurd,” one gallerist told me. “Do I quarantine my cell phone every time I use it!?”)

Certainly, being excessively safe is better than the opposite, but I did wonder how many MFA students and other casual visitors were left out of this year’s edition because they couldn’t secure a test or even a pass (tickets were sold out as of Saturday morning.) The price to pay for our health, but the fair did have an eerily empty, aseptic feel — no kooky artists in wacky outfits, no bands of scene-y art kids. —Valentina Di Liscia

You’d think that a shrunken, almost “boutique”-style, fair with smaller booths and lower traffic would propel galleries to present their best offerings, but no; what we got was a lackluster display of safe choices and art fitted best for corporate foyers.

By contrast, at Randall’s Island, you could stumble onto many hidden gems among the heaps of market-friendly art. Here, I can only point to a few exceptions, among them: British artist Sarah Ball’s simple but alluring portraits of gender-nonconforming people, presented by Stephen Friedman Gallery; Stefan Rinck’s totemic sculptures from Nino Mier; and a double-sided painting on paper by outsider artist Henry Darger at Andrew Edlin Gallery’s booth. The painting, depicting a war scene on one side and a celebration of dancing figures on the other, is titled “They tried to get away with the enemy’s plans...” —HB

Perhaps in an act of rebellion against the show’s sterile vibes, I set out to find the most eccentric art on view. In a sea of the yawn-inducing staples of Park Avenue apartments that typically furnish fair booths (a Josef Albers “Square,” a Joel Shapiro sculpture), I was pleasantly surprised to discover Jennifer Paige Cohen’s uncanny female figures sculpted in plaster, gauze, and clothing scraps in Nicelle Beauchene Gallery’s presentation; a volcanic, over-the-top ceramic by Brian Rochefort caught my eye at Massimo de Carlo’s booth. Karma brought what looked like three stacked Amazon Prime packages that turned out to be highly realistic replicas of painted bronze by LA-based artist Mungo Thomson. “It’s a sign of our times,” gallery director Siniša Mačković told me. I imagined a sly smile behind his mask as a flash of irony crossed his gaze. —VD

“It’s a bit anticlimactic,” an art professional who preferred to stay anonymous shared of her impression of the Shed edition. “It just doesn’t have the same energy as in past years.”

I have to confess, I found myself enjoying the tranquil atmosphere. Fewer galleries meant more visual bandwidth to dedicate to individual works, and less time spent dodging labyrinthine crowds and strong wafts of Chanel. I stood for several minutes admiring Howardena Pindell's shapely mixed media canvas at Garth Greenan's booth, and throughout the show, it was quiet enough to listen in on dealers' ridiculous sales pitches ("Colonizers were the original frat boys," I heard one say, describing a painting to a pair of collectors.) But for a security guard I chatted with, who was working Frieze for the third time, the smaller event just made the day go by slowly. "That's my favorite work right there," he said, pointing out a hanging painting on silk by Cindy Ji Hye Kim at François Ghebaly's stand. Overhearing our dialogue, a passing gallerist intercepted: "No, your favorite is at my booth, C6. Go check it out." —VD

Frieze NY is traditionally a celebration of fashion with guests showing off their quirkiest and most festive outfits. But there was very little of that this year, perhaps an outcome of the collective experience of spending the better part of last year in sweatpants. "The fashion style is low key this time," a booth worker agreed. "People rolled out of their Hamptons homes with just casual outfits."

There was also no open bar as in past years. The only free perk was at a Perrier stand that didn't see too much demand. —HB

We flooded out of the Shed along with a few other stragglers who stayed until the fair's 7pm close and decided to grab a bite at a tapas spot nearby to exchange impressions. A woman sitting at the table next to us was reading the Frieze circular distributed to visitors, completely hidden behind its gigantic, newspaper-style pages. Her name was Meredith Palmer, a private dealer based in the city, and we asked her what she thought of the fair. While graciously offering us some of her pan con tomate, Palmer said she enjoyed Frieze's tribute to photography scholar Sarah Lewis's Vision & Justice Project, in the form of programs, banners, and artworks throughout the fair. But she sorely missed seeing work by artists from the more international galleries that the Randall's Island show usually draws. We all agreed on one thing, though: it was better than an online viewing room. Cheers to that.

—VD