

From Contemplative to Morbid at The Art Show

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Sean Kelly's booth featuring works by the British artist Idris Khan.

Sean Kelly

The mirrored floor at Petzel, the first gallery visitors to The Art Show encounter, was nearly pristine on Wednesday evening before the fair's annual gala preview.

But by Sunday, when the annual fair at the Park Avenue Armory on Manhattan's Upper East Side is over, the floor will have cracked under the feet of hundreds of visitors. The splintered surface will be a tangible history of those who ventured for a closer look at the seemingly abstract images in vivid colorful photograms by the Los Angeles artist Walead Beshty, who also created the mirrored floor.

To Maureen Bray, executive director of the Art Dealers Association of America (ADAA), Petzel's floor exemplifies the kind of engagement the show strives to achieve with its visitors. Like museums and art galleries, art fairs, too, want to make sure visitors are more than just observers, and are drawn in to learn more about the featured artists and artwork.

In its 32nd year, The Art Show is undoubtedly engaging, with a number of solo exhibitions spotlighting contemporary artists and, in particular, female artists, and booths with thoughtfully crafted themes, such as Jill Newhouse Gallery's exhibition exploring the history of landscape painting.



Walead Beshty's *Two-Sided Picture (YR)*, 2007. Fujicolor Crystal Archive, 2011, Color photographic paper

Petzel Gallery

The 72 participating dealers at the fair are ADAA members whose proposals were vetted and selected by a 14-member committee, says Andy Schoelkopf, president and co-founder of Menconi + Schoelkopf gallery. "It's a very healthy process," he says.

Unlike many art fairs, the relatively small number of booths at The Art Show means each one can be a bit larger, giving dealers more room to present their offerings and fairgoers a sense of being able to slow down, and spend more time at each.

In some cases, artists made pieces specifically for the show. British artist's Idris Khan's blue-and-black works, featuring densely layered stamped text on a blue background at Sean Kelly's gallery is a great example, Schoelkopf says, of a "very serious, very beautiful contemplative booth of one artist."

The works appear minimalist from afar, but up close, the text—reflecting literature, art, music, and religion—emerges, with an occasional word becoming evident. It's this idea of "slowing everything down, and collapsing a moment in time into one single frame," says Adair Lentini, a spokeswoman for the gallery.

Some of the booths engage visitors through collaboration, such as Fraenkel Gallery and Luhring Augustine gallery's presentation of works in a double booth by the photographer Lee Friedlander and the contemporary artist, Christopher Wool.

The Friedlander works feature words and images in photographs from the 1960s and 1970s, and more recent pieces from a series titled *Signs* and *Western Landscapes*. They are mingled with Wool prints, including the 11-foot-wide *Untitled (Billboard Graz)*, 1992/2019.

The fair also features 19 exhibitions focused on female artists such as Vanessa German, a sculptor, writer, and activist, at Pavel Zoubok's booth and the Op Art artist Edna Andrade at Locks Gallery. The focus on women, the largest to date, is a "direct reflection of a broadening of the understanding and appreciation of who is making art," Bray says.



William H. Johnson's, Cagnes-Sur-Mer, c.1928-29

Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC

One example is Cheim & Read's presentation of Alice Neel's paintings from 1928 to 1973, a body of work, the gallery says, that illustrates the "development of her signature mark-making and irreverent style."

During much of this period, the Abstract Expressionists were ascendant, and they looked down on Neel as a “fool who was painting portraits,” says John Cheim, the gallery’s co-founder. Yet Neel was very aware of shifts in the international art world, and her use of abstract techniques can be found in the faces of figures and in supports holding up the rails in *Ninth Avenue El*, 1935, and in images of eyes peering out of the waves in *The Sea*, 1947.

That the art historical canon has shifted to embrace more individuals who have been making art all along is also evident throughout the show. Michael Rosenfeld’s gallery, for instance, features William H. Johnson, an African-American artist born in 1901 in Florence, S.C., who was trained at the National Academy of Design and moved to Europe in 1926.

Johnson’s brief, but remarkable career (the artist became ill and was institutionalized in his mid-40s), is detailed in Rosenfeld’s show. Works range from modernist oil-on-canvas landscapes created in the late 1920s, to Johnson’s lively, primitive-style pochoirs—stencil works from the early 1940s. It’s an assemblage that Rosenfeld says “took many years to accumulate.”





Donald Moffett's Lot 090307/20 (O, drop), 2007/2020. Oil, cotton, aluminum, rabbit skin size, poly vinyl acetate on linen.

Marianne Boesky Gallery

From 12 p.m. to 3 p.m. on Sunday, fairgoers will have an opportunity to meet contemporary artists whose work is featured at several of the galleries. Among them will be Donald Moffett, a New York artist, whose *Fleisch* series has a solo exhibition at Marianne Boesky Gallery's booth.

Moffett was at the fair on Wednesday ahead of the gala, to describe how he returned to canvases made in 2007 with hand-sewn holes and zippers, adding subtle changes to the canvases that harken more to what his gallery calls the textural abstraction of his recent work from the political activism of years past.

Fleisch's starting point was a horrific news event involving cannibalism, a story difficult to repeat, that Moffett describes as "deeply pathological, criminal, and cruel." In an essay that accompanies a catalog of the exhibition, the art historian Kate Nesin writes: "As bodies of work go, this one was—and remains, more than a decade later—a lean extremity, harrowing in its formal efficiencies."

Without the sensationalist context, the works draw the viewer in with their simplicity, and seeming playfulness. To a piece titled *Lot 090307/20 (O, drop), 2007/2020*, featuring a zipper dividing the top third of the canvas, a large intentionally blood-red painted circle, with a literal hole in the middle, Moffett added a white tear-drop shape.

“Looking at the works fresh”—many years after putting the remaining ones on shelves out of sight—he says, provided “a certain freedom to go back into my own work and change it.” He also realized he could do so without the emotional attachment of when he first created them.

Yet Moffett points out there is a historical positioning to the original work. He refers to late 18th and early 19th century Spanish artist Francisco Goya, “countless paintings of David with the head of Goliath,” the Italian Renaissance artist Titian’s depictions of the rape of Lucrecia and, much more recently, Hugh Steers’ “profound and personal take on morbidity and mortal illness” during the heights of the AIDS epidemic, featured at Alexander Gray Associates at The Art Show.

“Pathology, perversion, criminality, and slaughter are deeply historical art topics,” Moffett says.