

# ARABIA <sup>Harper's</sup>BAZAAR

## Big Risks and Big Payoffs at The Armory Show 2018

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This year's edition saw changes met with positive feedback, and despite commercial transparency, took a satisfyingly closer look at African art, embraced large-scale risks, and explored an ominous take on bodily manipulations by technology

Though [The Armory Show](#) is a significant art world player that new executive director Nicole Berry says was founded on showcasing art made “in the now”, prioritising curatorial vision, its educational role and being at the forefront of certainly the US scene, it doesn’t shy away from strategy and acknowledging the importance of its commercial foundation. Tom Finkelpearl, commissioner of the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs, shared that part of New York’s cultural planning meant paying attention to the growing plight of individual artists, who it fears will soon start leaving the city, and thus funneled an extra \$1 million towards them. He also points out that fairs, such as The Armory Show, are a big player in ensuring that funding makes its way towards artists, who work in and around the art scene in various capacities. This transparency, in relation to the wave of regional MENASA fairs that tend to shy away from embracing their commercial side in favour of emphasising their stance as a platform for and nurturer of emerging art scenes and education – especially in light of limited museums – proved a refreshing shift that seemed to remove little from the aesthetic enjoyment of an institution that ultimately plays both sides equally.

The Armory Show is the headlining event of the now two-week Armory Week, which consists of smaller fairs [VOLTA](#), [Independent](#), [SPRING/BREAK](#), [NADA](#), [Collective Design](#), [SCOPE](#), [Art on Paper](#), [Clio Art Fair](#), [ADAA Art Show](#), and coincidentally, the opening of the new [Met Breuer](#). But though it’s cemented its place, with many galleries clamoring to take part in the key fair on the US scene, Berry acknowledges that it may be time to break old habits. Starting with a slimming of the number of participants – 198 this year down from 210 in 2017– in favour of removing monotonous rows, booths were expanded by 15 per cent and there was a marked honing in on quality. Throughout this, it still welcomed 43 new faces, including [Bank](#), [Pearl Lam Galleries](#) and [Yamamoto Gendai](#). In restructuring its layout, moving Focus to the forefront of Pier 92, ensuring that it, along with Insights, offered more solo and dual artist presentations, the fair also broke the long-held tradition of Modern works being shown there, with Contemporary down the connecting staircase at Pier 94. “We made changes last year to the floorplan,” says Berry, “But this year we were really going for it.” Her approach to giving the fair a little shake-up was without fear – and it didn’t go unnoticed.



It proved different to previous years, whether remarked upon by Berry, gallerists, or one collector in the VIP lounge who remarked that she had been to every edition since its inception in Gramery Park Hotel – save for one year when her dog was giving birth – and that this year just felt new. Every Armory Week fair is different and complementary, but this Armory was good. “It felt stale in a fair market where there’s so much competition,” says Berry. “The overall art market and world are changing so quickly that we needed to really take a good look and reevaluate to see what could make us stand out.” This included trying to make the fair digestible and enjoyable – which it proved to be – particularly by the streamlined introduction provided by the 28 Focus and 32 Insights galleries, further spatially broken up by a few of the 15 Platform presentations – large-scale in-situ installations. “Solo and dual artist presentations are memorable,” notes Berry. “When you’re taking in so much other information at art fairs, those are what stick out. For me when I visit fairs – and I go to a lot! – those are what people respond to.”

The two piers are separated by a winding staircase to lead from the upper to lower levels, and while some may find the staircase a disconnecting break, it offers an additional moment of pause for visitors, which serves as much of a chance to savour the visual deliciousness of Pier 92, as much as regroup and refresh for the much busier, buzzier 109 galleries of Pier 94. “The challenge is the fair not being on equal levels, and historically this pier has been branded as contemporary and I’m

really trying to break that,” notes Berry. Full of 20th and 21st-century artworks, with returnees such as [Gagosian](#) and [Perrotin](#), here the remaining Platform works were dispersed, including a new commission by Sir Richard Long and the luminous piece by Tara Donovan. The space for sizeable works throughout both piers was actively carved out – Berry notes that they serve as meeting points, mental breaks, reinforcements of the new energy, and balancers “to create an enjoyable experience in the fair fatigue that is happening – I’m well aware of it, I have it too!” she laughs. “Old habits die hard, and it’s a challenge and a fine line to walk between what people love about this fair and change, which is also good. But I do think that creating a fair where you can find amazing things on both piers is the way forward for us.”



The artworks on show – of which sales purportedly ranged from (taken with a grain of salt) \$8,000-\$1 million, with the brunt being sold for a more moderate under \$100,000 – were an impressive array of impact works based on quality over flash. While galleries such as [Ludorff](#) brought it hard with pieces by icons like Richter, Warhol and the Bechers, many took “extreme risks with their booths,” says Berry. This came in the form of selling only an individual or limited range of works by a single artist, such as [Lawrie Shabibi](#)’s booth with a giant mechanical wood work and a few smaller pieces by Shahpour Pouyan, or full on invocations of a design carte-blanche. [Mariane Ibrahim Gallery](#)’s stunning gilded and wood lattice-work décor highlighted a small handful of works by Lina Iris Viktor; [Wetterling Gallery](#)’s living-room set up was discombobulating yet invitingly playful; [Galerie Thomas Schulte](#)’s self-imposed jail-cell imprisonment was as literal as it sounds; [Empty Gallery](#)’s



unsettling and ominous showing of Tishan Hsu and Takesha Murata video and installations gave the impression of being inside someone's mind, or worse, body; and Pierogi's pink dioramas from Patrick Jacobs had a presentation that Berry has "never seen before." Ultimately, however, the \$10,000 Presents Booth Prize, recognising innovative gallery presentation in the Presents section (galleries under 10 years), went to blank projects, showing Igshaan Adams and Cinga Samson. Berry suspects that the calibre and seriousness of the crowd at the Amory is what gives galleries, and the fair's selection committee, the confidence to embrace risks.

While Berry, along with Focus and Platform curators Gabriel Ritter of the Minneapolis Institute of Art, and Jen Mergel, formerly of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, offer no indication of shared themes, the prominent showing of contemporary African art, subjects relating to the body and technology (unsurprisingly the overarching concept behind Focus), and emphasis on large-scale works could not be avoided – the latter exemplified by Leonardo Drew's seemingly alive and growing flora-esque installation taking over an entire corner. Noting that the fair isn't afraid, and follows through, in addressing difficult topics, "as fair producers we don't take a political stance, but it's our responsibility to show works that are presented in a particular cultural climate," says Berry. "There's a lot happening in the world, and we want to showcase the historical context with work being made now in response to personal experience and global climate." This included JR's installation on the outside of the fair, where he imposed the faces of Syrian migrants onto historic photographs of immigrants arriving on Ellis Island – "immigration is a huge topic and even if people don't recognise what it is immediately, people can dive deeper when they look up later on what he is really addressing" – or the purple anthropomorphic Mary Sibande sculptural installation of avatars tackling feminism and feminine power. This was developed in the talks programming – the panel *Collapsing Structures* discussed the role of art institutions in taking political stands, challenging museum neutrality and saw Laura Raicovich, former Queens Museum executive director, contentiously stating that cultural institutions express values that may not actually be matched by their actions.



Galleries brought engaging but concise selections – some suspected less ‘big ticket’ items as those are being reserved for [Art Basel HK](#) – including an edgy take on bodies. Chen Zen’s *Un-interrupted Voice* was an eerie tilted bed with bells and possible battering sticks hanging above it in a somewhat altar-like positioning; [Goodman Gallery](#) brought a Pepto-Bismol-hued gynecological examination chair and video depicting Afrofuturist-cum-psychedelic notions on sexuality and reproduction by Tabita Rezaire; Regina José Galindo’s performance video had her attempting to outrun a tank at [Prometeogallery di Ida Pisani](#); and then there were the bloody splatterings on canvas of Hermann Nitsch, who himself sat at the booth of [Marc Straus](#). The flash of video by erratic techie bad boy Ryan Trecartin at [Regen Projects](#), who focuses on human narratives, offered a good segue into the other main theme: technology.

A mini survey of Nam Jun Paik works were all over the centrally placed Gagosian booth, flashing away at visitors, while Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’s always intriguing technological fusions took the form of a smoking pool and facial recognition software at [Max Estrella](#). [Gallery Hyundai](#) opted for a satisfying (for the anti-tech) burial of TVs in boulders by Park Hyun-ki, [Upfor Gallery](#) offered Morehshin Allahyari’s take on digital colonialism, and Woody Vasulka’s fluorescent-bordering-on-blinding static and mirror play installation proved a danger for the sensorially sensitive at [BERG](#)

Contemporary. This note was picked up on as well by the talks – Hans Ulrich Obrist mused on how curating is a protest against forgetting, the importance of incorporating technologies in exhibitions, artificial intelligence, and the need for fresh experimentation between art and technology.



To round out the stimulating – and critically, non-exhaustive offering – was the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago's Naomi Beckwith chairing of the inaugural Curatorial Leadership Summit. Promising critical dialogue – as all fairs do – the closed-door discussion saw 75 curators invited to explore cultural appropriation, censorship and representation – topics which likely would have had several pressed ears against the door – but inadvertently serves to reinforce that an art fair is a commercial entity through and through. There may be relevant – and favourite fair term “urgent” – conversations and themes tackled, but it is often held inaccessibly high above the heads the public, who though tantalised with quick intros and tasty visual morsels, are relegated to booths in art fair halls where the money need flow.

*thearmoryshow.com*