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That Sanitation Truck Parked on the Pier? It's Part of the Show
Review of the Armory Show 2007 featuring "The Abduction From the Seraglio", a woven rug by Cristi Pogacean, at Plan B

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A Fair's Strategy: Solo Artists, Themes and Specters of Blockbusters

The Armory Show, which opens today on Pier 94, began life more than a dozen years ago as a funky, bed-bath-and-beyond affair in the guest rooms of a downtown hotel. Paintings were propped on pillows, drawings Scotch-taped to walls. One artist made love to a motorcycle; another took a three-day shower. The whole thing was kids playing Art Fair. If some of them took home some cash, that was nice but not really the point. Or maybe it was the point. I don't know.

Everyone has long since grown up. Art is big business. And with some 150 galleries on board, the fair looks like a corporate office, with cubicles to the horizon and generally tasteful art to fill them. Colin de Land, one of the show's founders, would have figured out ways to bust up this model by now. But when he died four years ago, a certain consciousness went with him — "underground" may not be quite the word for it, but something along those lines.

In any case, the Armory Show 2007 feels more consolidated, more vacuum-packed, more well tuned than ever. For the past several years, the show was physically split between two West Side piers; now it is all on one. Where there was once some diversity of mediums, painting has become overwhelmingly dominant. And along with the usual group displays, we are seeing more one-artist shows.

Paul Kasmin's booth is devoted entirely to rainbow-colored, text-based paintings by Deborah Kass that quote pop song lyrics, other artists and Ms. Kass's mother. One painting consists of the words "Enough Already"; another, titled "Do You Want to Funk With Me 2," messes around with what look to be the radiating abstract patterns favored by Mark Grotjahn, a young artist who has elicited much critical gush.

Robert Miller's booth bristles with gilded phalluses, courtesy of Yayoi Kusama. Foxy Production from Chelsea has a penumbral solo show by David Noonan, and Stella Lohaus Gallery from Belgium fills its walk-in closet of a space with Erik van Lieshout's smudgy, jittery works on paper. The last two galleries are among 30 appearing in the show for the first time — they are vetted by a

selection committee — and are earning their stripes the hard way. Both have booths at an outer edge of the show, at the end of a cul-de-sac.
But, of course, whether we're talking floor plans or global geography, some of the best art happens on the margins. It may be a long hike to reach two Manhattan galleries — Canada, from the Lower East Side, and Harris Liebermann, from TriBeCa — ensconced on the fair's far western rim, but they reward us with paintings by Rosson Crow and Karl Haendel.

Dicksmith Gallery from London, tucked between larger neighbors way in the front near the unloading area, mixes photo-based conceptual pieces with paintings in a spare, light-touch way, so that individual pieces by Edward Kay, Meiro Koizumi, George Henry Longly and Rupert Norfolk shine. And there's a magnetically reticent little group show of paintings, a sculpture and a woven rug with a startling hostage scene at Plan B, a gallery from Cluj, Romania. At first you barely notice the installation, but once you do, it grips you like the sight of a tombstone stumbled across in a field.

Arario Gallery from Beijing and Seoul brings an eye-catching painting by one of China's best-selling Political Pop pioneers, Wang Guangyi. I find his and other post-Maoist work of limited interest, and I'm not wild about the other art in the booth. But do ask to see the catalog for the gallery's recent Beijing roundup of contemporary Indian art. The show looks fantastic on the page. Arario plans to open a branch in New York, and with luck will bring it along.

Michael Stevenson Gallery from Cape Town is the fair's first African participant, and its installation looks terrific. A handsome portrait painting by Mustafa Maluka holds the center of the booth, flanked by two sets of photographs. One, by Guy Tillim, is of child soldiers in Congo; the other, by Pieter Hugo, of Boy Scouts in Liberia. Together they set up yin and yang images of political power on the subcontinent today. Also here: work by Nicholas Hlobo, an extremely interesting young artist based in Johannesburg, who stitches gender-bending wearables and will soon be doing a brief residency in New York.

A few dealers are back this year after a break; Daniel Reich is one. You forget how distinctive his eye is until you see it in this larger company. At his booth are a hushed architectural painting by Birgit Megerle, who is showing at his Chelsea gallery now, and a sculpture and pair of shadow-box collages by Anya Kielar. At a time when everyone is trying to be a little different, Ms. Kielar is even more different, without forcing the issue.

With the glut of very been-there-looking painting, sculpture or sculpturelike work seems especially arresting. The place of historical honor in this category goes to Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Beginning in the late 1960s, Ms. Ukeles developed a sort of performance-oriented work that integrated feminism, environmentalism and labor activism. She called it maintenance art because it both derived from and focused on actions that affect everyday life, like cleaning, cooking and taking care of children.

As unsalaried artist in residence to the New York City Department of Sanitation in the early 1980s, in a space just north of Pier 94, Ms. Ukeles choreographed an unforgettable ballet mécanique using sanitation trucks as performers. One such truck, covered with mirrored glass, hulks over Ronald Feldman's booth at the fair, where you'll also find documentation of her career. She's one of the greats, and any young artist wanting to get a sense of how art can get out of the Armory Show and into the real world should give her a call.

For more overtly political work, there's a punchy installation of sculptures by the Amsterdam-based Folkert de Jong at James Cohan, with figures of ghoulishly melting, candy-colored American statesmen — Benjamin Franklin; Abraham Lincoln twice — set against an explosive Yinka Shonibare mural. But if Mr. de Jong's sculptures are entertainingly gross, another by Thomas Hirschhorn, at Arndt & Partner Berlin/Zurich nearby, is not.

Titled "Outgrowth-Family," and made to be exhibited at the fair, it looks like a huge mutant plant with swollen branches made from layered duct tape. Stuck among them are dozens of color

photographs culled from the Internet of men and women with horrifying natural deformities.
I've had my doubts about Mr. Hirschhorn's topical art in the past; despite its brutalizing mode, it felt too fussy, too rococo; in a word, too arty. (A smaller earlier piece by him, which I saw only half-assembled at Galerie Chantal Crousel, seemed problematic this way.) But slowly and surely he has been formulating an aesthetic genre of his own: art that is impossible to experience without physical revulsion and moral embarrassment.

In "Outgrowth-Family" he has achieved his goal: absolute unsightliness. And, appropriately, he is sharing his success, like a virus, with the art world at one of its biggest, slickest, costliest family gatherings. I dare say Colin de Land would have approved.