

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The New York Times
New York Art Fairs Are Returning, Eyes Open and Fingers Crossed
Zachary Small
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Image: The lounge at the Armory Art Show on March 4, 2020, which opened right before the pandemic halted the art fair merry-go-round. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Major exhibitions like the Armory Show are coming back from a pandemic hiatus, but travel restrictions and the rise of the Delta variant are challenging their plans.

Artworks are being flown in from overseas, the showroom has been spruced up and ticket sales have started for the Armory

Show, which is readying to become the first major American art fair to come back amid the pandemic, when it opens Sept. 9 at its new location at the Javits Convention Center.

“We have to be ready for anything,” the fair’s executive director, Nicole Berry, said in a phone interview. “We are putting on this event and have a Plan A, B, C, D and E.”

When plans for the Armory Show came together earlier this year, Berry envisioned the fair as an anchor of the fall arts season, symbolizing the art world’s triumphant return to in-person selling and schmoozing. She planned on opening her event near full capacity, welcoming thousands of visitors to browse the works of nearly 500 artists presented by more than 200 galleries from 37 countries.

“We believe N.Y.C. will emerge from this pandemic stronger than ever,” Berry said at the time, describing the fall season as a “pivotal moment when the city’s cultural organizations are reopening.”

Then came a summer resurgence of the coronavirus, stagnant vaccination rates and travel restrictions, preventing many galleries from participating in what has typically been an economic engine in the art market. And earlier this month, several trade expos decided to cancel their shows, making the Champagne and oyster shucking celebrations of the past seem unlikely. The New York International Antiquarian Book Fair, the New York International Auto Show and PAD London, an art and design fair, all decided to forgo their 2021 editions.



Image: Doug Meyer’s “Decoy’s” (2021) from Daniel Cooney Fine Art in Art on Paper. Doug Meyer and Daniel Cooney Fine Art

The Armory Show still intends to feature dealers like David Zwirner, Stephen Friedman and Marianne Boesky and showcase important artists including Wolfgang Tillmans, Deborah Roberts and Jeffrey Gibson. But not everyone is on board. Nearly a quarter of its more than 200 exhibitors have deferred participation in the physical fair — though they will take part online — because of travel restrictions. Gallery representatives who are unable to attend will have registrations rolled over to next year’s edition, Berry said.

Some European collectors eager to attend the fair have contingency plans of their own. Alain Servais, a Belgian investment banker and collector, has considered

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spending two weeks in Mexico to bypass the travel restrictions in his home country to enter the United States. “It’s nonsense and something very few people can afford,” he said. “So for now, the American art world will be largely left alone.”



Image: Sally J. Han's "Tipsy" (2021) at Fortnight Institute in the Independent Art Fair. Sally J. Han and Fortnight Institute

Sales from the world's art fairs reached an estimated \$16.6 billion in 2019, representing nearly 43 percent of annual sales for dealers, according to the Art Basel and UBS Art Market 2021 report. That percent was slashed in half during the pandemic, when more than 60 percent of art fairs around the world canceled events and dealers found ways of reaching clients online.

“When the vaccine first became widely available, it seemed as if a switch would flip and suddenly everything would revert — including large public gatherings like fairs,” said Natasha Degen, chairwoman of art market studies at the Fashion Institute of Technology. “Events like the Armory Show will attract a core group of art world players but not the broader crowds that have given fairs their energy in recent years.”



Image: Sandow Birk's "Apprehension Ted Kaczynski," curated by Sean Meredith for Track 16 for Spring/Break Art Show. Sandow Birk

Armory Show organizers said that the majority of ticket sales occur just before the event and without reservations, so it's difficult to say how crowded the showroom floor will be. In a typical year, the show welcomes about 54,000 people during its run time, but the pandemic has led to some health and safety measures that could limit crowds. Those include a mask mandate inside the exhibition, timed tickets and either proof of vaccination or a negative Covid-19 test within 72

hours of entering the Javits Center. Two other fairs opening that same week have adopted the same policies: the Spring/Break Art Show at 625 Madison Avenue and the Future Fair at 601 West 26th Street. However, visitors wishing to attend Independent at the Battery Maritime Building and Art on Paper at Pier 36 must be vaccinated.

Despite setbacks and uncertainty, the Armory Show is proceeding with a program that revises its model. Its new location at the Javits Center has allowed fair organizers to combine its modern and contemporary art sections under one roof. The fair is also making a larger investment in public art, starting a new program called Armory Off-Site, which has commissioned four artists to create works throughout the city with the help of municipal groups like the Parks Department, the Hudson River Park Trust and the Hell's Kitchen Alliance.

One of the Off-Site programs is at Pier 64, where the artist Katja Larsson will present “New Neo Classics,” a series of sculptures that imbue everyday objects like a crumpled baseball cap with an aura of antiquity reminiscent of the ancient Egyptian fragmented statues found in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Another Off-Site work will feature a large RV parked at Astor Place, where the artists Johnny DeFeo and Aaron Zulpo, from a collective called the Guild of Adventure Painters, will host painting sessions with guest artists and share an exhibition of new works.

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Image: A rendering of Katja Larsson's "New Neo Classics," 2021. Katja Larsson and Aicon Contemporary

In Chelsea, the Future Fair has rebuilt its program from the ground up after postponing its inaugural edition last year because of the pandemic. Nearly half of the show's presenters are unable to participate and will be replaced by new galleries. Among the new list of 34 exhibitors, 25 percent are owned by people of color and half are owned by women — a rarity in the world of art fairs, which lacks diversity.

"We have been working on this since 2018 and it's been a labor of love," said Rachel Mijares Fick, one of the Future Fair's organizers. "There were moments when we were like, How are we going to get through this?" A similar question floated through the minds of other gallerists who needed to make a decision on whether to take part in the Armory Show.

"It was a disappointment to realize that we wouldn't make it this year," said Nadia Gerazouni, whose Athens gallery, the Breeder, has decided to participate online. The Armory Show would have been the dealer's first physical fair since the pandemic started, and an opportunity to introduce her young artists to the American market. Some other galleries have decided to hire proxies to operate their booths, but Gerazouni was skeptical. "It's not possible for a new hire to just show up and do the job of a gallery director," she said.



Image: Jennifer Rose Sciarrino's "knot in the act" (2020) at the Daniel Faria Gallery in the Armory Show. Jennifer Rose Sciarrino and Daniel Faria Gallery

Daniel Faria, a dealer based in Toronto, is determined to have a successful run at the Armory Show for the sake of his artists. Last year, Jennifer Rose Sciarrino was supposed to take part in Frieze Sculpture at Rockefeller Center when the program shifted focus because of the pandemic. She lost that opportunity, but will have another chance at exhibiting through the Armory Show.

"We have a responsibility to show her work," said Faria, who is preparing to wear an N95 mask on the showroom floor to be safe.

"To say that I am 100 percent comfortable wouldn't necessarily be true," he added. "But at this point, we have committed to going and it would take the Armory Show canceling itself for us not to go."