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Jerry Saltz Recommends the Best Art at Independent Projects

By Jerry Saltz

It's not clear whether the art world, or even the New York art world, needs another art fair. There are already scores of them, and some of our bigger galleries participate in as many as 20 a year. But the intrepid organizers of the smaller, edgier fair known as the Independent evidently think we do.

Independent Projects, which opened last night, is taking a newish form and will last ten days instead of the usual four or five. So that's a mildly interesting twist — although it's partly owed to the rental policies of the building it occupies, formerly home to the DIA Foundation. (What were you thinking, DIA, when you closed it down and decamped to Beacon?) Laid out more rigidly than the regular Independent, Independent Projects has parallel diagonal walls and clearer divisions between booths, and feels altogether like the let's-make-a-deal art fair that it says it's not.

Its big claim to difference, though, is that all 40 participants are staging one-person shows — never mind that Frieze, Basel, and Miami include sections for solos. Independent Projects also has a pretty clubby in-crowd feel, with blue-chip megagalleries, hip spaces, other established well-known galleries, and only one from the Lower East Side. And only about a quarter of the galleries are owned by women. And only around a quarter of the solo shows are by women. All this really rubs the wrong way and isn't the most collegial way to be communal. But galleries are the lifeblood of the art world, and anything they do together to take back some of the awful controlling power of the biggest mall-like art fairs and the spectacle of auction houses' locking in on contemporary art is more than good. I say: Bring it, gallerists, any way you want to. And bring it some do. Of course there's plenty of the now-ubiquitous School of Boring all-over monochrome abstraction that's all the rage with kids and collectors these days. (I showed one artist who'd made a sparkly black painting a picture I'd taken of another artist's sparkly black painting, and he gaped at it, mistaking it for his own. Both of them sold, too.) In the laid-back atmosphere here, I saw artists I hadn't known about, met dealers I didn't know of, saw some famous artists looking fabulous, and even had an experience with a re-creation of a 1957 work that brought a tear to my eye. Don't expect the mad scabbling rush of most art fairs. Chat. Peruse. My don't-miss list includes a five-way tie for Best in Show.

- Mike Kelley's 1980s felt paintings at Skarstedt are absolutely smashing. We miss you, Mike.
- Karma, a gallery, publishing company, and all-around creative force of the first magnitude, has been killing it over the last year or so, and for Independent Projects, it brought in a work by one of my favorite artists, the late Duane Hanson. His 1990 bronze of a flea-market lady wearing a Florida T-shirt and a visor, sitting in a chair reading a paper, is so real it becomes unreal. Viewers come in close to inspect its uncanny verisimilitude as one dog would to another, sniffing to pick up its scent.
- Raymond Pettibon has created two walls of drawings, paintings, and whatnot, any one of which I'd take home in a second.
- White Columns, which organized the fair with gallerist Elizabeth Dee and Laura Mitterrand, has a long shelf of Aztec-like ceramic cats by June Hamper that made me purr ... and want.
- Venus Over Manhattan is presenting an important, rarely seen 1963 soap sculpture by David Medalla.



There's more. (It's nice to see former gallerist Jay Gorney back in action doing a painting show with Mathew Cerlety. More, Jay. And Joan Jonas at Gavin Brown's Enterprise is as odd, entertaining, and out-there as ever.) But the weirdest experience I had was with that 1957 Yves Klein. Don't read this next bit if you don't want me to spoil a surprise. A small white-box sculpture has a hole on each side. Black velvet stops us from seeing in. You stick your hand through, and there's a naked man or woman. Sounds silly. Maybe is. I put my hand in, extended my arm forward, and felt the soft flesh of a female shoulder. I was shocked. More so when every cell in my body was thrown into upheaval, as my id wanted me to move my hand downward and my superego demanded

propriety. As my superego won out, I felt 12 years old again, thrilled, confused, thrown for a loop by the mysteries of the flesh. (Later, I ran into the model I'd touched. She said that most men simply poked her, whereas almost every woman initially recoiled with a yelp, then reached back in and caressed her shoulders.) In any event, this almost-empty white container is 100 times fuller than Marina Abramovic's current almost-empty show at Sean Kelly Gallery. It reminds us that, cliquish or not, Independent Projects is still good art-world energy, trying something, anything, to take the sting out of the events that are draining the life out of the art world.