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Taking Pulse at a Slower Pace

by Franklin Einspruch

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A visitor admires works by Leo Villareal and Erik Thor Sandberg at Conner Contemporary Art's booth at Pulse. Photo by David Cohen for artcritical. see below for detail of Sandberg

It was only Thursday, December 1, but Vixen, a Shiba Inu belonging to Miami collector Sean Gelb, had had enough of the fairs. She lay on her side, panting, at the foot of a pedestal holding one of Patricia Piccinini's mutant babies. People crowded the booth of Conner Contemporary Art at the Pulse Art Fair to gawk at it, but Vixen remained steadfastly unimpressed.

I've been through the trial of fair going in Miami enough times to have worked out a two-part strategy that forestalls the moment when I start feeling like Vixen. Part One is to proudly not see everything. My list for this year was Art Miami, Pulse, Scope and Art Asia (combined in the same circus tent this year), Seven, and Edge Zones. Skipping the main fair may sound like treason, but it means enough art-viewing impetus is left to appreciate the plenitude on offer at six others, which is considerable.

Part Two is to accept the fact that you are at the art equivalent of a farmer's market. You are there only to admire and sample some minuscule fraction of its bounty.

On Thursday at Pulse, some critical part of my brain titled like a shoved pinball machine when I saw the actor Michael Douglas and the comely rear view of Catherine Zeta Jones making their way through a corridor of art made dark by one of the power outages that plagued the early days of the fair. This is no way to see art, I thought, nor perhaps Catherine Zeta Jones. I wandered toward the exit, where Paul Kusseneers, whose eponymous gallery was showing atmospheric, filmy, grid-based abstractions by Stefan Annarel, stood fuming in the half-light. Even in the dim booth Annarel looked good, but imagine coming all the way from Antwerp and having to present them that way. A longtime Miami artist speculated, without evidence but not without cause, that the fair organizers hadn't adequately greased the city's palm. I overheard a man in a black suit, clutching a walkie-talkie, explain to a gallery director in romantic lighting that a generator was being installed posthaste and they were not going to wait for the local utility to restore power.

By Sunday, this or better had been accomplished. I make a habit of asking dealers whether they're having a good fair, without detailing what I mean by that. Everyone, even Kusseneers, answered yes and seemed sincere about it. Duane Hanson, whose work I had seen the day before at Bridge Red Studios Project Space in North Miami, came to mind upon reviewing Piccinini's animal-human hybrid infant at Conner Contemporary. How much more difficult it must have been for Hanson to achieve sculptural photorealism with 1970s materials. This new take speaks to an imminent biotechnological future in which more and more things are going to demand human treatment despite their categorical position at the edge of humanity. As art, though, it was too illustrative and sentimental. (Charming and patently illustrative work by Maira Kalman, executed for author Michael Pollan's "Food Rules: An Eater's Manual" and appearing at Julie Saul, somehow escaped a similar fate.) Also at Conner was a meticulously painted lesbian orgy on a picnic table at night by Erik Thor Sandberg, inexplicably executed on a dramatically curved panel. Doubtless there was some allegory at work – there usually is in Sandberg – but it resisted deciphering, and not to its credit.



Maira Kalman, Lot-A-Burger, 2011. Gouache on paper, 9 x 13 inches. Courtesy of Jule Saul Gallery

Conner also had a handsome Leo Villareal, which I mentioned while admiring a small, animated LED piece, amber and flickering, by Jim Campbell at Hosfelt Gallery. This turned out to be a bit of a touchy subject – the gallery noted Campbell's earlier work with the medium. Better works of technology-driven abstraction, which is still at its early stages, is at least as successful as its better constructivist counterparts. Bitforms showed a work by Zimoun in which cardboard chits were mounted on little spindles and made to spin and collide in a crowded grid. It was charmingly low budget and seemed to have a determined personality.

There was a note of controversy around some non-technology-driven abstraction as well. Daniel Weinberg Gallery had some small geometric abstractions that looked as if they were studies for Frank Stella's protractor series, both in shape and pastel palette. They turned out to be works by Walter Darby Bannard, whose art and writings I have studied at length, and they actually *predate* Stella's series.



Jus Juchtmans, 20110313, 2011. Acrylic on Canvas, 47 x 35.5 inches. Courtesy of Margaret Thatcher Projects.

Flirting abstractly with both paint and technology were Michael Laube at Kuckei & Kuckei, Sharon Louden at Morgan Lehman, and Markus Weggenmann at Thomas Taubert Contemporary. Laube had painted a variety of stripes and marks on layers of superimposed Plexiglas, and despite an initial impression of excessive trickiness they held up to repeated viewing. Louden's deliberate, spare paintings in oil on paper on panel distantly recalled Julius Bissier, reinterpreted in high-key materials. The attractive sensibility refused to translate into her video or sculpture, as evidenced by examples thereof placed alongside them. Weggenmann sends out designs for simple abstractions and semi-abstractions to be executed in high-gloss coatings on aluminum. The lack of touch looks good in enamel-like paints like this, and big, simple shapes tend to stand out at the fairs as visual respites. Jus Juchtmans at Margaret Thatcher Projects served this purpose as well.

At a certain point of art viewing, patterns emerge unbidden from the surplus of material. Was there an architectural trend at Pulse, exemplified by Gregory Euclide's whimsical wall-mounted landscape sculptures at David B. Smith, Sarah KcKenzie's luscious studies of house framing in oil (better than her larger, deadpan treatments of finished buildings) at Jen Bekman Projects, Isidro Blasco's snappy urban photo-collages at Black & White Project Space, and Ayssa Dennis's delicately drawn architectural fantasies at Kesting Ray? Was there some kind of weird angle on female sexuality, given data points that include Erik Thor Sandberg, Jeff Bark's C-Print of a bosomy nude oddly arrayed in kneeling profile among strips of Super-8 film at Hasted Kraeutler, and Hillary Harkness's *Sinking of the Bismark* (2002), a naval disaster acted out by scantily uniformed crew in a style reminiscent of early Renaissance masters, at Daniel Weinberg? Or was it just time to go home?

But not before stopping in the Impulse section of the fair, dedicated to single-artist installations. Ellen Miller Gallery, for instance, were showing the work of Deb Todd Wheeler, whose photogrammed cyanotypes of plastic bags hauntingly evoke sea life, despite their origins as garbage. Teresa Diehl closed off the booth of Galerie Anita Bekcers for an installation of predatory mammals and fighter jets, cast in clear glycerin, arranged over a spottit, rotating mirror and covered with a camouflage net of flowers. She made it in response to the revolutions in the Middle East this year, but it grew into a transcendent, timeless narrative. I came to rest at the work of Alia Malley at Sam Lee. Her Frederick-Church-inspired photographs of the Los Angeles County landscape, either deserted or literally desert, presented inviting vistas, refreshingly free of crowds and, well, art.

Now it was time, like Vixen, to find a floor to lie on.