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Art Matters | At the Independent Art Fair, Thinking Outside the White Box

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By Ann Binlot

When Elizabeth Dee and Darren Flook founded the Independent Art Fair in 2010, the art landscape in New York was a different place. Frieze had yet to enter the American market, and the vast Armory Show dominated the fair scene. “There was really a need for something more than the model that was imposed on us,” says the fair’s director, Laura Mitterrand.

Now in its fifth year at the Chelsea building that formerly housed the Dia Center for the Arts, the Independent continues to satiate the appetites of art enthusiasts who are hungry for the new and cutting-edge. Unlike the typical fair models, exhibitors at the fair are selected through referrals instead of through an application process. The fair also refrains from having similar-size, cookie-cutter booths. For this year’s layout, two young architects, Andrew Feuerstein and Bret Quagliara, conceptualized a series of tangram-inspired walls that can be customized according to each exhibitor’s needs. “The layout is dictated not by the space itself, it’s dictated by the galleries and what they’re going to be showing,” Mitterrand says.

The fair is also relatively small in size, with just 56 exhibitors spread out over four floors, as opposed to more than 200 at the Armory Show, creating for a more intimate setting conducive to collaboration and connecting.

Several of the galleries showing decided to eschew the typical fair exhibit model altogether. The Lower East Side gallery Untitled opted to show not one, but 12 artists — thanks to Brad Troemel, who opted to have 11 rotating solo presentations by artists including Dwyer Kilcollin, Hannah Levy and James Clarkson follow his bitcoin-incorporated artworks. Each artist will exhibit for two-hour increments. Lauren Christiansen, director at Untitled, says that it’s about “adding a foil to the actual platform of the fair, just making it more an opportunity for a project and less about being a standard art fair booth.”

London’s Modern Art gallery decided to join forces with New York’s Maccarone and exhibit the tambourine sculptures of an artist they both represent, Paul Lee. Berlin’s Galerie Mehdi Chouakri went for a site-specific intervention with dots by Austrian artist Gerwald Rockenschaub that are sprinkled through the doors and staircase of the building. “It’s like a very playful way of dealing with a space,” says Mehdi Chouakri, the owner. New York-based Ramiken Crucible had a curiously bizarre sculpture of aspic by Andra Ursuta. Karma, a New York-based publisher of art editions, had a display of works by Amy O’Neill that show prizes won from children’s carnival games. Köln’s Galerie Susanne Zander opted to show unknown outsider artists. “This is one of the very few fairs where you can do such a project and people will understand what you want to say,” Susanne Zander says. McCaffrey Fine Art went the revival route, showcasing Richard Nonas, an artist whose work appeared in the 1977 Documenta show. Sprüth Magers, which has spaces in Berlin and London, presented a performance piece by John Bock in which an actress chain-sawed a wooden sculpture of a man; the dismantled parts will be packed in suitcases and sold off.

The model for Independent has been so successful that its organizers plan to host another edition during the November auction season. “I hope that people come to the fair wanting to see a gallery in particular, because they know it, because they’ve been involved in that gallery’s program before, and come out having made connections with multiple other galleries,” Mitterrand says.

The Independent runs through March 9 at 548 West 22nd Street, New York; independentnewyork.com.