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Artspace

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Picks

10 of the Best Artworks of the 2015 Armory Show

By Andrew M. Goldstein
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Jesse Stecklow may only be 21 years old, but he's losing no time in injecting his work with the kind of conceptual complexity that artists typically require years of obfuscation to obtain. Each layer in his work has a layer beneath it. Try this on for size: set at equidistant positions in the booth and separated by lines of text whose word counts perfectly fit the space, these photographs show heads of wheat nestled into tuning forks, one half of which are set on flypaper, the other on dirty white wool; the wheat arises from a previous series where he inserted analog air samplers into Quartz clocks to gather data from his gallery's environment and found the air to contain trace amounts of wheat, while the tuning forks come from the fact that Quartz clocks get their name because each one has a tiny quartz tuning fork embedded inside to help maintain the regularity of their operation. The photographs themselves are set into chemical trays, with eye-deceiving shadows rendered across the top of the print. Each element refers back to a previous recondite series or, as in the case of the white wool background, adumbrates a future body of work. A wunderkind, Stecklow has already gained an excited following among collectors, including Anita Zabłudowicz, who acquired an entire collection of his work relating to sound.

JESSE STECKLOW
Untitled (2015)
M+B – Los Angeles
\$3,500 per piece



ALAN VEGA
Van Gogh (1974)
Galerie Laurent Godin – Paris
\$60,000



Before ascending to the pantheon of music legend as the lead singer of the seminal New York protopunk band Suicide, Alan Vega (born Boruch Alan Bermowitz of Bensonhurst) was a hustling young artist on the spear tip of the city's art scene, studying under Ad Reinhardt at Brooklyn College and then joining the radical Art Workers' Coalition—alongside Hans Haacke, Carl Andre, and Avalanche founders Liza Bear and Willoughby Sharp—that pressured museums to show more work by women and minorities. His own art was very much in the angry spirit of the times, mostly messy yet precise sculptures out of junked materials to fixate on themes of aggression (boxers and Nazis are recurring themes) and sex. Made three years before Suicide's first album was released, this piece pays to the ultimate protopunk artist, Vincent van Gogh, with a crucifix-shaped tangle of electric detritus that glows in the rapturous yellows of the Dutch painter's sunflowers. It has all the crunching economy of a Suicide song, a few of which Vega—who in recent years has shown at MoMA PS1 and Invisible Exports—played the Saturday of the fair at Webster Hall.

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ELIAS SIME

Aremoch (2004)

James Cohan Gallery – New York
Works range \$25,000 to \$95,000

Based in Addis Ababa, where he has created the fantastically ornate, Gaudi-esque Zoma Contemporary Art Center, the Ethiopian artist Elias Sime dispatches bands of neighborhood kids to the city's famously overstuffed merkato to scrounge up the odds and ends—often hand-me-downs from Western economies—that populate his intricate woven canvases. These tapestry-like pieces, which Sime 'signs' with a smooshed bottle cap embedded in one corner, recreate the sense of flowing water, turbulent air, and other naturalistic themes, all channeled through a crafty folk aesthetic. (This one's title translates as "weeds.") A friend of gallery artist Fred Tomaselli, Sime has reached a broad audience through the luxuriant opera sets he has created for such productions as Esa-Pekka Salonen's Oedipus Rex; he was introduced to the Cohans through the good offices of Lawrence Weschler, who has an uncanny knack for unearthing artists whose talents extend them beyond the borders of the fine-art world.



IAN TWEEDY

Fragment Study V (2015)

Monitor – Rome

\$15,000



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JONATHAN MARSHALL

Everything (Abridged) (2015)

Grimm – Amsterdam

\$22,000

Data visualization is the virtuosic forte of the Brooklyn-based artist Jonathan Marshall, who has begun riveting collectors with his large-scale paintings that take a profound or personal subject—the history of mankind, the chains of consumption and production, an "incomplete history of walking," his own artistic influence—and render them in hugely appealing graphic presentations. The result is a bit like a cross between Mark Lombardi and Andrew Kuo, and this giant painting is a research-heavy evocation of the entirety of geological time from the Big Bang to the present moment, with helpful info boxes unpacking subjects like "What Is a Quark?" and the Cambrian Explosion. A former studio assistant for the artist Matthew Day Jackson, the 34-year-old Marshall is excellent at graphic design—magazine editors should take note—and he also sidelines as a craftsman, making his own frames, for instance. Keep an eye on him.



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NINA BEIER & SIMON DYBBROE MØLLER
Hands (ongoing series)
Andersen's Contemporary – Copenhagen
\$1,200 to \$3,000, depending on the size

Two Danish artists whose careers have been taking off separately (particularly Nina Beier, who has her first show at Metro Pictures coming up next month), this cool couple has also collaborated on a charmingly macabre series for the past three years that gives you an idea of what artists do for fun when they're dating. Here's the process: the two go on eBay and search for copies of Rodin's hand sculptures, which brings up high-quality bronze castings (some are museum copies) along with meh art-student assignments in plaster, and then paint them in a naive flesh tone, with their stubs brushed blood red as if they had been freshly hacked off. Referencing Rodin's belief that the hand was the emblem of the industrial age, the sculptures—about 30 of which have been made so far—look terrific in an assortment of mixed sizes.



PRZEMEK PYSZCZEK
Untitled (2015)
Mihai Nicodim Gallery – Bucharest, Los Angeles
\$5,500



Known for making elegantly restrained hybrids of painting and sculpture, the young Berlin-based artist Przemek PyszczeK lyricizes the social and architectural contexts of his native Poland in the pre- and post-Communist eras, with the metalwork suggesting the ornamentation of gated buildings. This piece, hung high at Mihai Nicodim's booth, has a cool but pleasing mien—looking at it feels like peering out a window into a clear, beautiful, Constructivist-informed day. The artist, who hasn't shown in the U.S. yet, will have a show opening in January of 2016. (Note for artists: Nicodim currently shows all European artists, but wants to bring on some local talent through its L.A. gallery.)

ZIPPORA FRIED
Mauve (2015)
On Stellar Rays – New York
\$24,000

Abstract painting is getting some healthy blowback these days due to its faddish recent over-conquest of the market, but the gorgeous compositions of Zippora Fried at On Stellar Rays's booth reminds that there's nothing wrong—and everything right—with a livable object of tremendous beauty. Made with dark mauve colored pencil set down in sedulously repeated marks, this piece has a fluttering texture that delights the eye and recalls the Peruvian feathered wall panels that hung outside the Met's Modern galleries last spring. Fried can do it all, and her upcoming solo show in Marfa later this year, where she'll show her landscape-inspired paintings and photographs, is a reason to rejoice.



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MICHAEL E. SMITH
Untitled (2015)
KOW – Berlin
\$15,000

A tough-minded artist who makes work commenting on the ruination of his native Detroit in the so-called post-Fordist era, Michael E. Smith makes hauntingly spare sculptures that he imbues with themes of deep, unresolvable conflict. Here, for instance, a stack of whale vertebrae is punctured by a battered rung from an industrial stepladder of the kind you'd see at a factory, creating something that looks a bit like an archeological artifact from a cursed civilization, where the organic and the machine-made are forced to war. Violence is inherent in the works, which he makes by buying objects—nothing is found—and personally beating the hell out of them until they look sufficiently battle-worn. An artist who studied with Jessica Stockholder in Yale's MFA program, Smith (not to be confused with the great middle-initial-less video artist) has a show coming up at SculptureCenter this May.



HUGUETTE CALAND
Bodrum (2008)
Lombard Fried Gallery – New York
\$475,000



Now 84 years old, Huguette Caland grew up as the daughter of the first president of the Lebanese Republic, Bechara El Khoury, tending for him in his old age until he died when she was in her early thirties—at which point she cast aside the decorous clothes and manners of her elite circle, donned a smock (an article of clothing she would become famous for decorating), went to art school in Beirut, and became an artist. In the '60s and '70s, when Beirut was a cosmopolitan capital, Caland became famous for a voluminous body of erotic works, which made her a symbol of freedom in the region; later she focused on creating lovely, colorful free-hanging canvases that she dyed and then drew on and painted. Now receiving an upswell of recognition outside the Middle East, she received her first show in New York in years last fall at Lombard Fried—though she can no longer paint, due to a hand condition—and the Pompidou is in talks to acquire a large selection of her erotica.