

Up in Armory

The Art Fair unzipped



In preparing for this year's edition of the fair, the organisers realised that The Armory Show does not have the enormous pull that it once had. With the proliferation of art fairs, biennials, and other extravagant art events happening across the globe at frequent intervals, they chose to be realistic and reassess the situation. And this has been a good thing. Trimming away the excess and concentrating on a smaller selection of galleries, has resulted in a majority of striking works, potently presented at a scale well defined and contained. Quite frankly, it was a welcome relief from the overkill of mediocrity that one perceives at many an art fair.

ANNA SANSOM

A moment of reflection. What have I done in my life so far?, an artwork by Atsushi Kaga, is one of those pieces that has universal meaning. In the context of the Armory Show in New York, where the Japanese artist had a solo presentation of small-scale paintings featuring his bunny character Usacchi (Mother's Tankstation, Dublin), this could also be perceived as a metaphor for the art fair as a whole. For this 16th edition, the Armory had reassessed its position in New York's increasingly competitive art fair landscape, battling to refresh its identity. Held in March, the dates fall between Art Basel Miami Beach in December and Frieze New York in May.

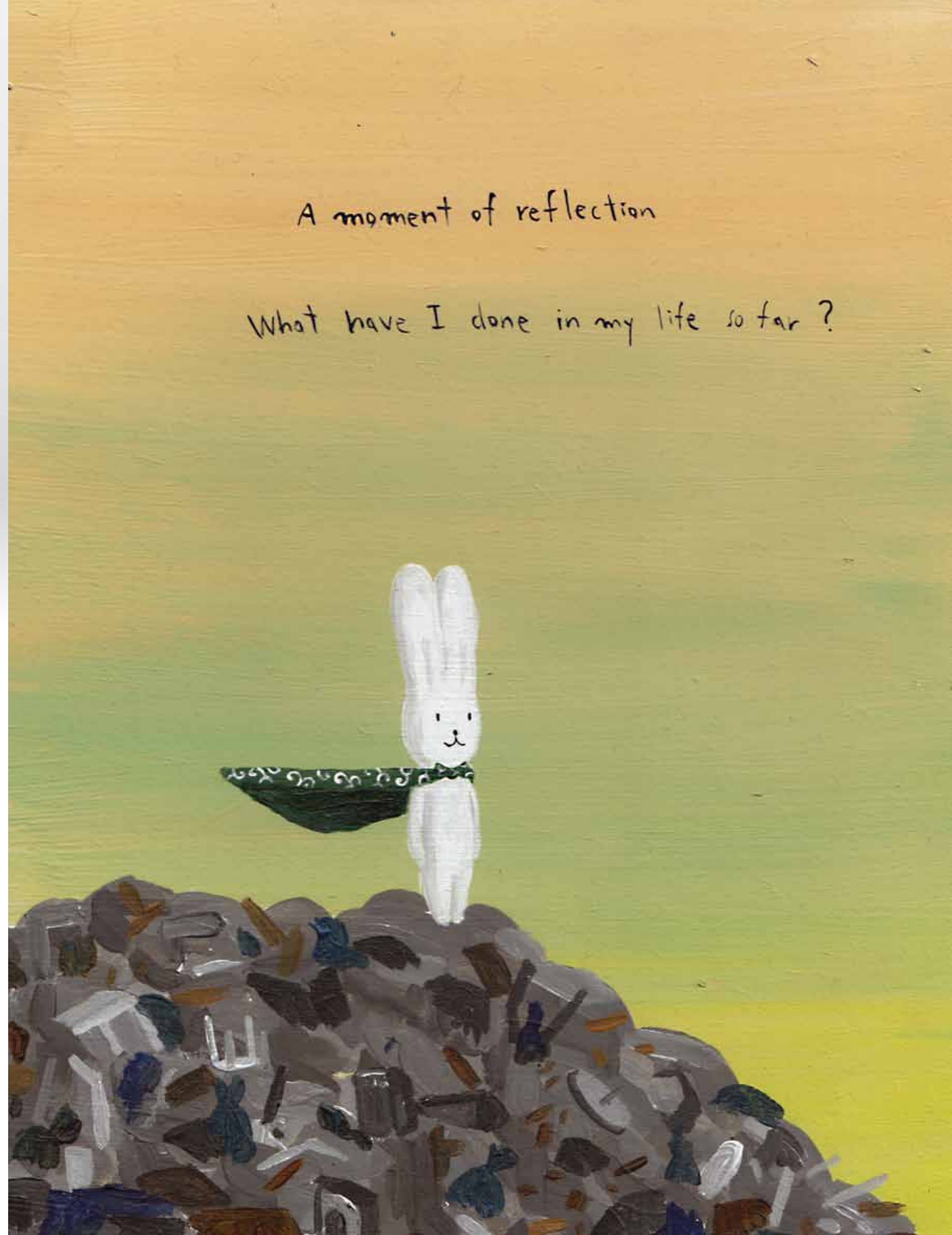
"Frieze has changed the nature of the art fair landscape in New York City", admits Noah Horowitz, director of The Armory Show, in reference to the London fair's Big Apple spinoff. "Before then, the Armory was the only real fair for international

art dealers to participate in if they were an ambitious contemporary or modern art gallery." Even in March, there are other fairs – namely, the Art Show organised by the Art Dealers Association of America (an upscale fair presenting blue-chip art) and Independent (an edgy fair for more conceptual forms of contemporary art) – that the Armory has to contend with. So, rather than expand in size at the risk of diminishing the quality, the Armory decided to "scale back and be rigorous with the selection committee", Horowitz says. To view another artwork metaphorically, think of the erasers in David Adamo's *Untitled (Erasers)* (Galerie Rodolphe Janssen, Brussels). Horowitz wanted to rubout the expansionist fair formula in favour of something leaner.

"The Armory is a real American fair, with mostly American dealers and mostly New York collectors", claims Janssen. The March edition coincided with

UNTITLED (ERASERS), 2014
by David Adamo
Cast plaster, painted
Variable dimensions
Courtesy of Galerie Rodolphe Janssen,
Belgium

Facing page:
A MOMENT OF REFLECTION. WHAT
HAVE I DONE IN MY LIFE SO FAR?,
2014, by Atsushi Kaga
Acrylic on board
24 x 20 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Mother's
Tankstation





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the opening of the Whitney Biennial. At Piers 92 and 94, overlooking the Hudson River, over 200 galleries set up booths – contemporary in Pier 92, modern in Pier 94. Besides American galleries such as David Zwirner and Marianne Boesky, were European ones such as Thaddaeus Ropac, Massimo de Carlo, Victoria Miro, and Galleria Continua. In addition to more singular artist presentations, a special feature was Focus: *China*, a section of 16 Chinese galleries, curated by Philip Tinari, director of the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing. “I wanted to present a wide sampling of the emerging art scene in China, peppered by lesser-known interesting positions from across the three-and-a-half decade history of contemporary art in China”, Tinari informs.

FOCUS: CHINA

Subjects here ranged from the personal and political, to the everyday and surreal. At Gallery Exit was an intriguing piece entitled *Satellite of* (2013), by Nadim Abbas, a 34-year-old artist based in Hong Kong. In what the gallery describes as “a live domestic drama”, two small, robotic vacuum cleaners move around a space, randomly nudging spiky concrete balls and changing their configuration whilst removing dust. “Nadim Abbas's installation tries to triangulate domesticity, technology, and war in a way that is ultimately quite subversive”, states Tinari.

One of the most engaging exhibits was *Fitness for All!* by Polit-Sheer-Form-Office – a collective of five artists born in the 1960s that includes Song Dong, Hong

Hao, Leng Lin, Liu Jianhua, and Xiao Yu. This was an interactive installation of modified, blue, ready-made exercise machines that are a familiar sight in China's public parks. Visitors were invited to obtain a light workout by trying out the machines. Entertaining, but politically charged, the piece parodies propaganda. “Fitness For All is a slogan employed throughout the People's Republic of China in tandem with campaigns aimed at motivating society to exercise and pay more attention to their health”, says Mathieu Borysevicz, director of Bank/MabSociety in Shanghai. “To non-Chinese, these machines and the corresponding activities may appear strange, absurd, and humorous, but they are jungle-gyms for adults aimed at improving blood circulation, agility, and musculature.”

Another special project was *Merely a Mistake* by Liu Wiu – upright structural sculptures that at a glance recall scaffolding. Further inspection revealed that they were meticulously made of pieced-together remnants of Chinese buildings, the shades of institutional blue and green readily conveying that the found materials were from the interiors of Chinese hospitals and schools. In this way, the 42-year-old artist provokes reflections about China's accelerated urbanisation and its construction industry.

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Elsewhere were other formal compositions infused with narrative. At Chambers Fine Art, Zhao Zhao's rectangular sculpture *Fragments*, composed of pieces of stainless steel that evoke shattered glass, lay flat on the floor. It was inspired by a car accident in 2005 in which the 32-year-old artist's head collided with the front windscreen, splintering the glass. At Gallery Yang, Beijing, Liang Shuo's piecemeal assemblage series called *Fit*, saw vernacular items – kitchen utensils, cleaning brushes, an ironing board, a child's bicycle – stripped of their original function and refashioned into sculptural elements.



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OVERVIEW

From slender brass sculptures by the late Fausto Melotti (Galleria Repetto) to Tony Cragg's *Distant Cousin* (2008), which sold for around \$1 million at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, there were plenty of strong works to be seen. For Horowitz, one of the highlights was a solo presentation by Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle (Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin). A Spanish artist based in Chicago, Manglano-Ovalle makes sculptures that are sometimes inspired by nature. At the Armory, the elements in his fibreglass and aluminium *Storm Prototype II* (2006) hovered like silver helium balloons near his slender *Bird in Space Prototype for Re-Entry* (2013), an obvious appropriation of Constantin Brancusi's famous sculpture *Bird in Space*, created in 1923.



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FIT No. 8, 2014 (1) by Liang Shuo
Mixed media
Courtesy of Gallery Yang, Beijing

DISTANT COUSIN, 2008 (2)
by Tony Cragg
Stainless steel, 1250 kg
259 x 202 x 163 cm
© The Artist / Courtesy of Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg

IMO STORM PROTOTYPE II, 2006 (3)
BIRD IN SPACE PROTOTYPE FOR RE-ENTRY, 2014 (4)
by Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin.

HESITANT MOVEMENT SKY, 2013 (5)
by Olafur Eliasson
Partially silvered glass, stainless steel
130 x 150 x 8 cm

FITNESS FOR ALL!, 2014 (1)
by Polit-Sheer-Form-Office
Courtesy of Bank/MABSociety, Shanghai

SATELLITE OF, 2013 (2)
by Nadim Abbas
Courtesy of Gallery Exit, Hong Kong

MERELY A MISTAKE II No.9,
2009-2011 (2) by Liu Wei
Doors and door frames, wooden
beams, acrylic board, stainless
steel, iron
407 x 190 x 115 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann
Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

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Hazoumè, a Yoruba artist, whisked us away to Benin, where 98% of motorbike drivers use clandestinely refined petrol from neighbouring Nigeria because fuel is too costly. Videos show this being transported into Benin, and there are sculptures made from plastic tanks and other materials that recall tribal masks, which are also representative of the hairstyles denoting the matrimonial state of Yoruba women.

Art fairs are partly cultural economics, partly an opportunity to view a vibrant diversity of creativity. In this environment, an interesting piece to reflect on is *Zero Dollar* (1974-1984) by Cildo Meireles (Galeria Bergamin, Sao Paulo). The Brazilian artist made a project about alternative currency, in which he combined the notions of valuelessness and counterfeiting, in a subversive meditation on the nature of money. A pause for thought for collectors trawling through the Armory.



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BODJOU-BODJOU, 2013 (1)
Found objects
50 x 30 x 18cm
MA POULE, 2013 (2)
Plastic & Metal
46 x 42 x 12 cm
by Romuald Hazoumè
Photos: the artist
Courtesy of October Gallery London

INVISIBLE WOMEN, 2012 (3)
by Abigail DeVille
Model, garbage bags, accumulated objects
105 x 73 x 90 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Michel Rein, Paris/Brussels

GLINT, 2013 (4) by Michael DeLucia
Plywood and construction enamel
243 x 172 x 150 cm
Courtesy of Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Bruxelles

ZERO DOLLAR, 1974-1984 (5)
by Cildo Meireles
Courtesy of Galeria Bergamin, Sao Paulo



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THE EYE, 2012 (1) by Simon Evans
Collage on paper
80 x 80 cm each
© The Artist / Courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai

MINDSCAPE (lava), 2012 (2)
Ragna Róbertsdóttir
Black lava salt on glass
Courtesy of the Artist and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik

GRANDMA RUBY'S RECLINER, 2009 (3) by LaToya Ruby Frazier
Gelatin silver print
61 x 50.8 cm
Edition of 3 + 2 AP
Courtesy of the artist and Michel Rein, Paris/Brussels

Artists appropriating past works is a recurring subject. At James Cohan Gallery we wry interpretations of Josef Albers' *Homage to the Square* by British artist Simon Evans. Made with a rainbow plethora of colour, the diptych by Evans is entitled *The Eye* (2012) – the two squares made from a collaged layering of innumerable pieces of paper, each having *The Eye* written around its perimeter. What attracted extra attention at the Cohan stand, though, were the monochromatic, abstract paintings by American artist Michelle Grabner, who is also one of the three co-curators of this year's Whitney Biennial. Grabner, 52, a mid-career artist, is also a professor in the department of painting and drawing at the Art Institute of Chicago.

So how do European galleries tackle the question of what to bring to the Armory? For Paris dealer Michel Rein, the answer was to exhibit two young American female artists – LaToya Ruby Frazier and Abigail DeVille. Frazier's black-and-white photographs of her grandmother in the working-class industrial town of Braddock, Pennsylvania, where she grew up, were juxtaposed with DeVille's sculptures made out of accumulated objects and debris – both referring to urban, social decay. Imagery that would have been less familiar to the American public was that of the delicate *Mindscape* works from 2012 by Ragna Róbertsdóttir (i8Gallery, Reykjavik) that were realised by placing black lava salt on glass. At October Gallery, London, the solo presentation by Romuald