

Independent 20th Century and the Armory Show Reviews: An Inclusive Kickoff to the Art Season

One fair looks to expand the modernist canon while another highlights the many voices working in contemporary art.



The art world and the NFL both kicked off their seasons on Thursday with more than a little in common. Eager crowds. Small fortunes trading hands. Hard-edge competition to acquire undervalued talent. But there are no scoreboards in the gallery world, so determining winners proves far trickier in that arena. Nevertheless, at Independent 20th Century and the Armory Show fans of various artistic stripes will find something to cheer for.

Downtown, just off the Battery, the Independent Art Fair's intimate offshoot returns for its second year, looking to expand—not rewrite—the 20th-century canon with 30-some exhibitors. This elevated approach—augmenting history instead of supplanting it—is especially welcome these days, with many of the galleries making strong cases that artists forgotten or overlooked, especially on grounds of cultural or gender norms, deserve to have their legacies included in the modernist historical record.

Most impressive on that front is the display of baskets at Donald Ellis Gallery, woven by Louisa Keyser, also known as Dat So La Lee. Keyser (1850-1925), a member of the Washoe people, is highly regarded by appreciators of American Indian art and basketry, but this collection of her marvelously geometric work proves that she should also be heralded as a pioneering modernist, an icon in her field as finely attuned to form as any artist working in her lifetime. Her intricate patterns—blazes and diamonds aplenty—and ultrafine weaving meant that individual works could take a year to make. This display makes an important case not just for Keyser's place in art history, but also for more inclusively evaluating indigenous art as a whole.



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Left: Louisa Keyser; Top-right: 'Degikup LK60' (1916) by Louisa Keyser; Bottom-right: 'Degikup LK52' (1912) by Louisa Keyser DONALD ELLIS GALLERY

While Keyser had a successful career, her medium meant that she was largely seen as a craftsperson (albeit one whose emphasis was on aesthetics, not utility). Hal Busse (1926-2018), on the other hand, found recognition in the postwar German art world—shows, residencies and membership in the influential ZERO group. That is, until her marriage to another artist and motherhood led to her fading from the scene. Beck & Eggeling's booth brings Busse back to the foreground, showing her work—its fiery reds and oranges and frequent circle motifs looking for a non-objective path forward in art after the devastation of the war—alongside several of her ZERO colleagues.

Similarly underappreciated due to her era's gender norms was Marie Laurencin (1883-1956), shown here by Nahmad Contemporary. In the male-dominated world of avant-garde 20th-century Paris, her circle included famed Cubists like Braque and Léger, but she dedicated herself to figuration. And while she enjoyed some prominence during her life—her art graced the cover of Vogue and she exhibited at the seismic 1913 Armory Show—her commitment to non-abstract

subjects that were exclusively female did little to ensure the longevity of her popularity. The women in these works, fair skinned and softly rendered in pastel hues, are unapologetic in their feminine strength, staring confidently out from the canvas on their own or grouped into supportive sororities.

Discoveries (or rediscoveries) like these are what make Independent 20th Century a delight. Also notable are the borderline-surreal paintings and sculptures of Miguel dos Santos at Galatea (from São Paulo, Brazil), human and inviting while feeling totemic and shamanistic, and Klaus Liebig's paintings at Berlin's Galerie Michael Janssen, giving stream-of-consciousness a visual outlet with their clustered images oozing sexuality and pop-culture references.

While there are some wasted opportunities here—can a fair booth showing Calder or Picasso really shine new light on names that are so familiar?—there are few miscues, and Independent 20th Century has quickly established itself as a can't-miss stop on any fall art itinerary.