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Highlights From EXPO Chicago

By Scott Indrisek

"Tell my mother not to worry (ix)" (2014) by Ryan Gander at Lisson Gallery's booth in EXPO Chicago
(© Ryan Gander; Courtesy of Lisson Gallery, London.)

The third edition of EXPO Chicago brought a well-rounded and impressive roster of international galleries to the city's Navy Pier, many of whom weren't afraid to showcase difficult work. The booths were complemented by Independent Curators International executive director Renaud Proch's companion program, In/Situ, which brought generally massive sculpture and installations into the space, including a looming tornado of colorful plastic cast-offs by Jessica Stockholder, and a reproduction of Iraq's Ishtar Gate (using newspaper and commercial packaging) by Michael Rakowitz, who also had a large-scale installation with Chicago-based Rhona Hoffman.

Hometown heavyweight Kavi Gupta hung gritty, neon-inflected abstracts by Scott Reeder in his booth, paired with equally colorful figurative paintings by Jose Lerma. The Chicago-based dealer — who opened gallery shows by Glenn Kaino and Mickalene Thomas this same weekend — also had a fantastic 2007 Roxy Paine sculpture that sat on its plinth like a sad mass of malevolent licorice.

 Elsewhere, galleries made smart, bold choices — like LA's Marc Foxx, who brought a number of collages by Frances Stark. London's Cabinet had some of my favorite pieces: mixed-media works on panel by Ed Atkins that combined Sue Williams-esque sketches with unnervingly poetic text ("Inside, the topless man comes downstairs and sits at the table, ready."). A narrow space behind Cabinet's main booth was also given over to a single 1982 wall piece by John Knight, which spelled out the artist's initials — an odd relic from the pre-cellphone past, now appearing like a monument to tweenspeak.

Savvy juxtapositions kept things interesting, like Honor Fraser's mash-up of new Snoopy paintings by KAWS with bent-corner sculptures by Kaz Oshiro, and a shaped canvas from '78 by Kenneth Noland. Bortolami's pairing of a leaning glass panel by Ann Veronica Janssens with a four-piece Daniel Buren fabric work was likewise inspired. Another favorite, at Hales Gallery: An enormous bronze bust by Tom Price giving everyone the eye in front of a large-scale Trenton Doyle Hancock painting.

Galerie Karsten Greve focused on bold-faced names to excellent effect: A ceramic crucifixion by Lucio Fontana, a fabric bust by Louise Bourgeois, a drawing by Cy Twombly, among other works. David Zwirner Gallery presented an interesting combination of colorful abstraction (Bridget Riley, Susan Frecon, Yayoi Kusama) and conceptual photography (Christopher Williams, Wolfgang Tillmans). Chicago artist Paula Crown presented a collaborative project with architect Jeanne Gang, who also designed EXPO's layout: A conceptual facsimile of a wall in her studio. (Visitors were asked to contribute their own inspiring messages or drawings; I added a portrait of my cat reading Modern Painters, next to sketches by Angel Otero and John Ripenhoff.) Two Tokyo galleries were also EXPO stand-outs: Base, which showed deliriously warped landscape paintings by Minako Abe, and Whitestone Gallery, which had a decades-wide spread of abstract works by former Gutai member Chiyu Uemae.

If I had to round out the rest of my personal fantasy-shopping list at this year's EXPO, it would likely include a Jason Middlebrook plank at Monique Meloche; two Jumana Manna sculptures at CRG Gallery's booth; a 20-piece Adam Helms silkscreen-on-felt at Marianne Boesky; and a Brie Ruais ceramic wall piece at Marc Selwyn. If my budget isn't exhausted yet I'd add a trio of Devin Troy Strother basketball dudes (Marlborough Chelsea), an abstract painting made of matchbook strikers by Gabriel de la Mora (Sicardi Gallery), and some funky, mixed-media paintings from the '60s by Regina Bogat at Zurcher. While in reality I returned to New York empty-handed, it was with a solid respect for Chicago's art scene in general, and for this fair's astute eye in particular.