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Independent Art Fair Review: Better Not Play It Safe

Among a multitude of pleasing yet unadventurous art, the standouts at this year's fair shone especially bright.

By Brian P. Kelly

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Alfie Caine's 'Daffodils' and 'Cliff Edge' (2024) PHOTO: COB GALLERY

New York

Independent, an art fair that frequently features some of the most inventive and stimulating work on New York's fair circuit, celebrates its 15th anniversary this year. The current edition, on view through Sunday, brings together nearly 90 exhibitors for the occasion. But while the mood at the preview on Thursday was undeniably excited—the acoustics at Spring Studios in Tribeca provided a noisy echo of the bustling crowds venturing across several floors—the work here was less boundary-pushing than in years past.

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This has been a persistent trend at the spring fairs, and from an economic standpoint it makes sense. Art fairs are primarily vehicles for sales, and it's widely agreed that the art market is still sorting itself out after a painful 2023, which has spread its corrective tendrils into this year. So it's logical for galleries to present works that are approachable, pleasing, easily envisioned in one's space and, as a result, more salable than adventurous fare might be.

Safe work isn't inherently bad any more than controversial work is ipso facto good, but it does lend a feeling of maddening homogeneity to these gatherings. The stark white booths begin to blend together, you lose sight of the exit, and you start to wonder if Daedalus was contracted to design the layout of the whole thing.



Danie Cansino's 'Majas at the Opera' (2024).

PHOTO: CHARLIE JAMES GALLERY

Nevertheless, it also means that exciting work stands out more when it rises above the parapet. Case in point: the Baroque-inspired paintings by **Danie Cansino** at Charlie James Gallery. Using grisaille—a painting technique where images are rendered in grayscale then glazed with color, producing especially luminous works—she riffs on Goya and Caravaggio in her mysterious, chiaroscuro works that celebrate Chicano culture. Her “Sueños con Alebrijes” transforms Goya’s iconic “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters,” casting a nude woman, covered in traditional Chicano tattoos, in the central role and

surrounding her with the colorful Mexican folk sculptures of animals mentioned in the title.

She also reinterprets the Spanish master’s “Majas on a Balcony” in her “Majas at the Opera,” putting her quartet of Latino subjects in a traditionally white space, and explores traditional still life with “Cheeto Fingers,” with the titular snack

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taking center stage, flanked by Champagne flutes and a wedding portrait, and staining a bride's dress—a humorous yet somber reflection on the difficulties of her parents' marriage. A pair of works painted on serapes and focused on human hands—one with people sipping Café Bustelo and smoking, the other with a duo playing pool—ties the more traditional Mexican past of the works' surface with contemporary scenes of that culture. Altogether the display is a rousing exploration of identity and art history, skillfully executed and invigorating to witness.

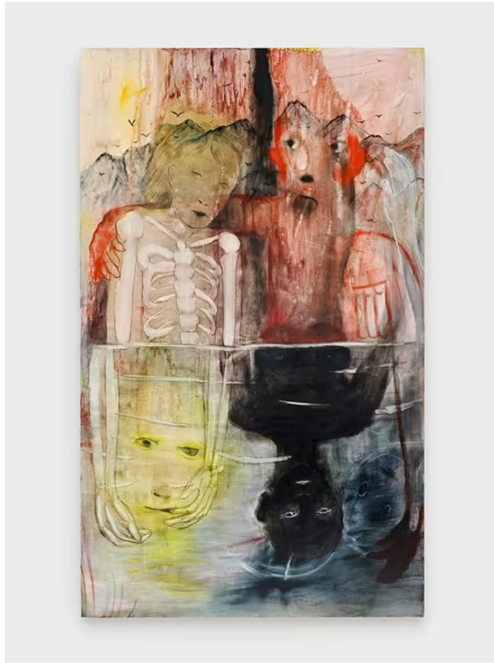


Tom Uttech's 'Nin-Babishagi' (2022). PHOTO: ALEXANDRE GALLERY

Also grand—in both quality and scale—are **Tom Uttech's** migration paintings at Alexandre Gallery. These large-scale landscapes, inspired by the artist's time in Quetico Park in Ontario and the Northwoods of his native Wisconsin, are flooded with animals. Flocks of sure-winged birds, ambling moose, lowing elk and dozens of other critters make up the menagerie as it proceeds across these canvases, all headed in the same direction. Despite the beauty of these images—the play of light against the trees and water is pure tranquility, an apt juxtaposition to the crisply rendered animals in motion—there's also just a hint of anxiety as we ponder the creatures' final destination. It brings to mind wildfires, environmental destruction, a second Noah's ark and sends a shiver down your spine—but just for a moment, until you're pulled back in by the

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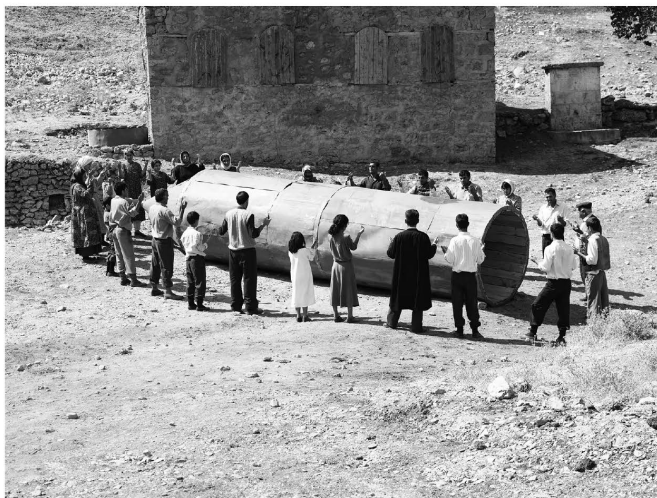
works' many captivating details. Each is a stirring ode to nature's wonder and fragility.



Asami Shoji's '24.4.13' (2024). PHOTO: LINSEED

In terms of visual pleasure, **Alfie Caine's** paintings are a delight. At Cob Gallery, these dreamlike interiors reveal the artist's background in architecture, their colorful rooms sharply angular, with tilting planes that enliven these imagined spaces. **Asami Shoji's** works at Linseed are eerier but no less affecting, their spectral and skeletal figures exhumations of the artist's anxieties about the body and health. And **Lucy Skaer's** sculptures at Grimm are quietly kinetic, reimagining space with humble materials, like the family dining-room table she has repurposed into a shallow, propped-up trough shaped

to her body's dimensions: It is rustically modernist but also tinged with a hint of the sepulchral.



Kutluğ Ataman's 'Journey to the Moon 6' (2009). PHOTO: NIRU RATNAM

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Finally, enchanting is the best way to describe **Kutluğ Ataman**'s photographs at Niru Ratnam, created while he made his whimsical film "Journey to the Moon," about a remote Turkish village that bands together to try to rise out of poverty by entering the space race. These striking images blend science and religion, surrealistic vistas and gritty everyday scenes. Everyone will have a favorite, but mine captures a group of villagers praying around the minaret they've repurposed as their rocket ship—its embodiment of hope in the face of adversity, the power of the communal spirit, and the friction between empiricism and mysticism is deeply moving. These photos show that, even in a season of safe exhibitions, adventure is out there for those who seek it.

Independent

Spring Studios, through May 12

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