

HYPERALLERGIC

The Independent Art Fair Embraces Color and Abstraction

Works by Franklin Williams, Curtis Talwst Santiago, and Marcus Amm caught my eye for their innovative use of color and diverse materials.

Jasmine Weber | 8 March 2019

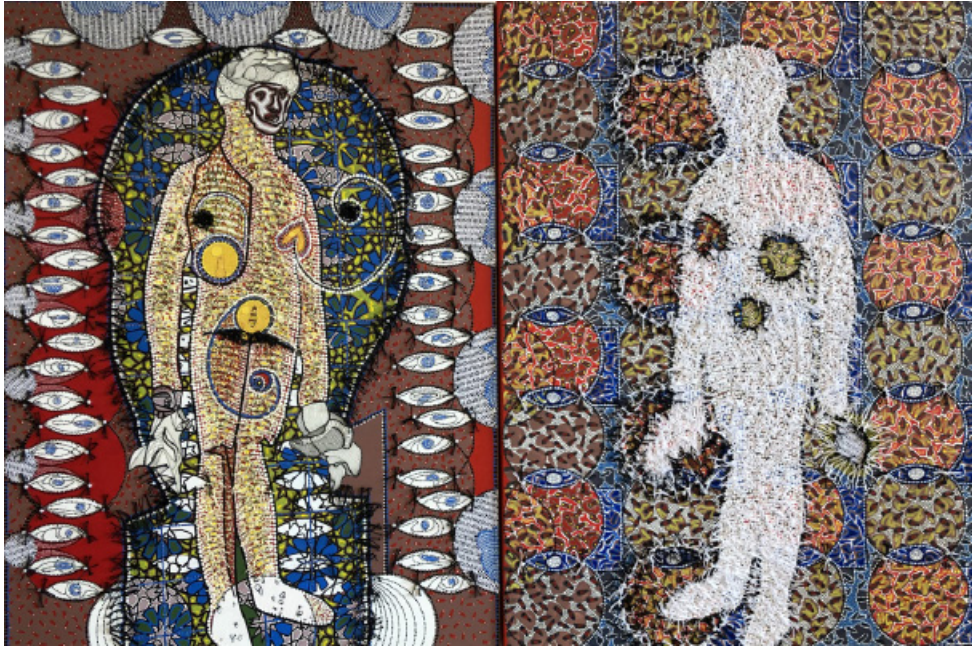


Franklin Williams, "Bodiless and More than a Man" (1975), acrylic and crochet thread on paper mounted to canvas, 67 x 60 inches (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Visiting this year's Independent Art Fair was my first experience of New York's art week — a task I approached with trepidation and mild anxiety, having heard horror stories of stifling, overcrowded fairs with lackluster artistic payout. However, I had heard rumblings that Independent was different, with a more manageable exhibitor-list and a more navigable layout. And in fact, I was pleasantly surprised.

Independent Art Fair was an abstract wonderland, full of work that challenged my tastes and opened me up to a realm of new artists working with bright colors, diverse subject matters, and manipulating unique materials to create forms I had yet to encounter.

Disappointingly, the fair pointed out a few of the art industry's unsavory habits — particularly, its homogenous attendance. The high number of talented, critical artists of color presenting works within the gallery booths was in stark opposition to the preview's apparent demographics, and this disappointing statistic left me feeling a bit unseen. Nonetheless, the art was my main focus, despite my discomfort, and that did not disappoint.



Franklin Williams, "Images of the Heart" (2018), acrylic, collage, and crochet thread and beads on canvas, 40 x 60 inches



Franklin Williams, "Images of the Heart" (2018) (detail), acrylic, collage, and crochet thread and beads on canvas, 40 x 60 inches

On the first floor, at Parker Gallery, I fell in love with Franklin Williams and his masterful, intricate works from the 1970s to today. These commanding portraits weave together yarn, thread, microscopic shimmer, pearls, fabric, canvas, and vinyl, producing simultaneously chaotic and organized depictions of human forms. These spiritual works require an intimate, close-to-the-canvas experience to unearth all of their painstaking layers.

I first encountered an expansive exhibition of Lucia Hierro's work at Elizabeth Dee Gallery in Harlem, where I first came to know and love her sculptures. (Dee happens to be the founder and CEO of Independent.) At Independent, in *This Cost of Living/El Costo De La Vida*, LatchKey Gallery showcases Lucia Hierro's expansive magnifications of Dominican culture, taking form in nearly-translucent tote bags filled with cultural talismans of New York Dominican life. These sculptures are a shrine to cultural memory and recollection. Their exaggerated sizing is a playful augmentation of a sentimental Dominicanidad, but simultaneously amplifies the implications of Washington Heights as a food desert.

At Galerie Nagel Draxler, feminist artist Martha Rosler makes a poignant commentary on privilege by altering an ad for "Money, America's Financial Advisor" and its "nearly five million affluent readers." The interior of a lavish, artistic loft is now juxtaposed by an apocalyptic, devastated neighborhood behind its residents. Though from the '80s, the work abysmally relevant to contemporary conversations on gentrification and the true cost of capitalism.

One of few video works was Elliott J. Robbins's "Nocturne: Sleeplessness/Sleep is the Cousin of Death" at Kai Matsumiya. In it, Snow White's fairytale becomes a funeral for a young Black boy and muffled, staticky audio in the background projects NPR news stories on the 2016 election and blaring sirens. Despite the fixedness of the figure, the rapid animation flashes every second. As I watched on, the layers of the video began to unravel — the character sometimes blinks, and their eyes open, just for just a moment. This appropriated imagery of a Disney princess is radically transformed by Robbins's cartoonish drawings, creating radically different impressions — the flowers that encase snow white like pillows appear tragically funerary in the case of a Black boy's body, calling into question societal realities and implicit biases.

At Rachel Uffner Gallery, Curtis Talwst Santiago's depictions of jovial, costumed individuals combine materials for a nostalgic take on Black traditions of Carnival. The celebration, which just recently passed, is a cultural celebration across Latin American and Caribbean nations developed by former slaves in spite of oppressive colonial rules barring enslaved people from Lenten celebrations. In the wake of emancipation, it is a celebration of freedom.

The Trinidadian artist sprays these subject's faces with red paint, his memory marked by his own experiences of Carnival tradition J'ouvert, in which Carnivalgoers paint their faces with red clay. Visually, these playful, colorful renderings of the cultural phenomenon draw more from centuries past, closer to the days of colonialism when the nation was first marked by the Atlantic slave trade, than the gorgeous glimmering, feathered version of Carnival we see today, but they are nevertheless imbued with a sense of joy that I was immediately drawn to.

At David Kordansky Gallery, Marcus Amm's abstractions blur the photographic aura readings popular in Chinatown with Mark Rothko's emotive color palettes. The works emit marvelous energy fields of their own, seeming to radiate diffused light and swirl as you move around them.

At Timothy Taylor, Eduardo Terrazas's embroidered, geometric works are objectively flawless — meticulously sewn and contained within perfect shapes. The works are a contemporary, playful application of a craft medium, with a colorful cultural reference to the artist's Mexican heritage.