

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Spring/Break, a Sprawling Alternative Art Fair that Delivers

On Tuesday, at the preview of the Spring/Break Art Show, a writer I know told me she'd been sent there on an assignment to cover the "little" fairs surrounding the Armory Show. I laugh-cried. Little? The curator-driven Spring/Break may be a satellite fair, but for the second year in a row, it occupies the sprawling, disused floors above the James A. Farley Post Office (whose McKim, Mead and White building is finally, after more than two decades of discussion, inching closer to becoming Moynihan Station, an expansion of Penn Station). Spring/Break's organizers, artists Ambre Kelly and Andrew Gori, say they received 250 applications for curatorial projects for this year's fair — based on the very loose theme of "COPY PASTE" — and ended up with 120 curators in 70 rooms. Are there really only 70 rooms? It feels like 100.

The fair stretches out over a series of long hallways, with little white signs marking the rooms and projects like flags at full staff. Some rooms can only be accessed through others, nested inside one another like matryoshka dolls; these may all be curated together, or they may contain completely separate projects. Some rooms have wood paneling, others have carpets, still others have details that more clearly mark their former uses — gold bars, a thick door that leads to a walk-in safe, toilet stalls.

Although there's a very current appeal to seeing art in an abandoned space — and although such a setup usually conjures dreams of brilliant site specificity — most of the projects at Spring/Break appear fairly removed from the place they're in. One of the exceptions comes from Jennifer Dalton and Jennifer McCoy (the ladies behind Auxiliary Projects): *Bulldoze/Cement*, a duo show of work by Sonya Blesofsky and Susan Hamburger. For it, both artists studied the history of Penn Station. Blesofsky then created fragile architectural fragments that reference a model for the station built by architect Charles McKim, as well as the row houses and other structures that were demolished to make way for it in the early 20th century. Hamburger painted expressive, life-size portraits of three presidents of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company — including Alexander Cassatt, the painter Mary's brother, who "became obsessed" with the idea of a tunnel connecting New York and New Jersey, Hamburger said — and of the stone Day and Night figures that at one point adorned the building, but eventually ended up in a landfill. The installation is relatively spare, but it resonates thoughtfully with the architectural details of the room, including the geometric-patterned bars adorning the windows.

At the press conference, Gori noted that he and Kelly had "figured the space out" this year (in 2015 they only found out they'd be able to use it two weeks in advance). This rings especially true for a handful of projects where the art and the room seem to be working in tandem, despite not having been expressly planned that way. Greg Allen's *Chop Shop* is one such example, curated by Postmasters Gallery's Magda Sawon. Allen offers up re-creations of blue-chip artworks, among them Barnett Newman's much-derided "Voice of Fire" (1967) and a series of early Gerhard Richter paintings that the artist himself photographed and then destroyed in the 1960s. All either are or will be chopped up, so that "'regular' collectors," as the description refers to them, can afford to purchase a piece of art history. *Chop Shop* is installed in the cavernous former post office vault; standing in the entryway, you can gaze at the formerly untouchable, now fully cuttable, masterpieces from behind gold bars. They look modest and a little scared. (Rightfully so:

“Voice of Fire” lost its first chunk to an X-Acto knife on opening night.)



Tamas Banovich and William Powhida hanging up the chopped piece of the Barnett Newman “Voice of Fire” copy in Greg Allen’s “Chop Shop”

A similarly local resonance can be found in curator Krista Saunders Scenna’s (director of Ground Floor Gallery) mini exhibition *A Storied Collective*. Saunders has gathered seven artists who collect things — whether imagery from popular culture or discarded materials — and use their collections to shape narrative work. According to the sign on the door, the show is housed in an old “Legacy Records” room, which makes a perfect setting for artist Linda LaBella’s weathered bookcase spilling over with volumes, albums, photos, hats, and other personal artifacts (they come from her father, who stashed them in an off-limits cabinet in his studio until his death). Brendan Carroll’s (also a Hyperallergic contributor) beguiling Polaroid portraits, which blend documentary photography and fictional text, feel similarly at home in the space, as do Ian Trask’s witty slide mashups, drawn from a trove of 5,000 vintage slides he somehow inherited from the Trachtenburg Family Slideshow Players.

Several artists who have solo projects on view negotiate the former post office’s space by remaking it as their own. Among these is Cate Giordano, whose installation *Heavy Food*, curated by Catherine Mahoney, transforms a corner of the fourth floor into a dark but wondrous coffee shop. The primary inhabitants are a series of life-size customers, cobbled together from plaster, newsprint, cardboard, wood, gouache, wax, and other materials, who occupy old-fashioned diner booths and tables, plus a cashier standing guard over a case of sculpted donuts, cakes, and pies. Giordano’s installation draws its magic from the precision of her details — from the ugly floral patterns on the furniture to the orange-rimmed coffee pot in the waitress’s hand — as well as the interplay between this faithfulness to reality and the materiality of her creations.



Cate Giordano, 'Heavy Food,' curated by Catherine Mahoney

Two other compelling examples of space re-creation come from Azikiwe Mohammed, curated by artist and Pioneer Works founder Dustin Yellin, and Genevieve Gagnard, curated by gallerist Shulamit Nazarian and her gallery director, Renée Fox. Both artists have used the carpeting and wood paneling of their rooms to their advantage, to help them create intimate, imaginative worlds. In Gagnard's case, it's an apartment shared by two of her self-embodied characters, the Cat Lady and the Hairhopper, who appear in photographs on the walls; in Mohammed's, a thrift store (Jimmy's Thrift) in the fictional city of New Devonhaime, whose name was created by combining those of the five most densely populated black cities in the US. Gagnard's Apt. #3104 is a smart exploration of all the disparate pieces that make up an identity — cat pillows, mammy dolls, books by Malcolm X, self-portraits grappling with body image — while Mohammed's carefully considers those that define a place — in this case a city where things are “a little less crappy,” in the artist's words, for black people. His carefully packed room — which, like Gagnard's, features a mix of found and artist-made objects — includes a stranger's photo portfolio, an Afro-futurist inspired quilt, a plaque awarded to the winner of an NAACP Malcolm X Award, and a rack of New Devonhaime postcards. These feature the name of the city printed on celestial backgrounds, and on the back, a line by comedian Paul Mooney: “Everyone wants to be a nigger, but nobody wants to be a nigger.”

As for the bulk of the fair, it's filled with curatorial endeavors that use their rooms as you would a gallery: to show art, an impressive amount of which is good. Talwst Santiago's miniatures set in ring boxes, mixing traumatic current events with art historical references, are stunning (curator: Magdalyn Asimakis). Michael Adno is researching the past and present racist politics of Florida, and the results are dense and disconcerting (curator: Alejandro Jassan). David B. Smith creates photo collages that are woven on a Digital Jacquard loom into tapestries, which he then cuts up apart and reconfigures as otherworldly stuffed sculptures (curator: Jessica Hodin). Caroline Wells Chandler has placed his crocheted queer trolls perfectly around his room (curator: Jacob Rhodes), which borders Smith's for an excellent pairing.



Genevieve Gagnard, 'Apt. #3104,' curated by Shulamit Nazarian and Renée Fox



Cobi Moules, "Cover Boys II" (2015) in Michael Gaughran's 'Appropriate(d) Behavior'

In the realm of group shows — there are many, most of them of mixed quality — Rachel Phillips's Knife Hits brings together an incredibly dynamic crowd of sculptures by Elizabeth Ferry, Roxanne Jackson, and Ben Pederson, among the other offerings on its walls; Alex Sewell's Object Trap! creates an intriguing conversation between three very different painters — Nicholas Cueva, Paul Gagner, and Jessica Langley; and Michael Gaughran's Appropriate(d) Behavior is a clever meditation on queerness and pop culture, with Sarah Hill's Wonder Woman videos (riffing on Dara Birnbaum) and Cobi Moules's hyperrealist New Kids on the Block paintings (with the artist swapped in for one of the members) as the highlights. There's still plenty of work you can afford to miss at Spring/Break, but in the art world it's definitely a unicorn: a fair you'll find yourself actually wanting to spend time with.

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