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ART

Art on Paper Folds Together Elegance and Unruliness

With 85 galleries this year, the New York art fair devoted to works on paper explores the large and small, the personal and political.

Daniel A. Gross | 4 days ago



Timothy Paul Myers and Andrew Barnes, "Understory" (all images by the author for Hyperallergic)

If you walk to the southernmost part of the Lower East Side, past a waterfront construction site, a fire station, and a row of graffiti-covered trucks, you'll find — or, depending on your sense of direction, possibly not find — [Art on Paper 2018](#) inside the giant Pier 36 warehouse. This year, the event is larger than ever before, with 85 galleries bringing together drawings, paintings, photography, sculpture, and a range of other objects and oddities. On opening night, March 8, a drummer and electric cello player performed live near the entrance, making the fair sound like a podcast in which hundreds of people have gathered to murmur about art and sip bubbly from plastic cups.



Installation view of Art on Paper 2018

Last year, visitors were met at the entrance with [giant towers of hand-cut paper](#), and the 2018 fair plays with scale in a similar way. Just past the ticket booth, a shipping container-sized room contains everything you'd expect to see in a live-in basement — a couch, a television, harsh lightbulbs, stairs — but all of it is wrapped in orange felt. The installation is "Understory," by Timothy Paul Myers and Andrew Barnes (whose work [also became a favorite last year](#)), and it earns the attention it attracts. Delightful details crowd the room: clothes strewn about, boxes shoved part of the way into corners. One almost expects an orange-colored college dropout to come walking down the stairs. It

has the opposite effect of a cloth-wrapped Christo building: instead of elevating architecture with an artistic intervention, Myers and Barnes soften and electrify an almost claustrophobic domestic space.

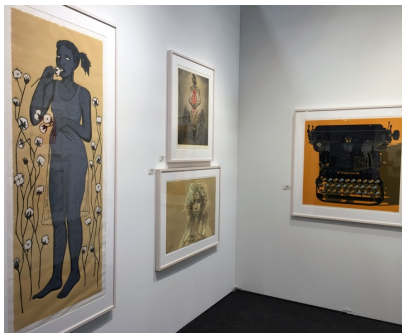
As visitors move past the entrance, into the dozens of booths that line the room, the work quickly shrinks in size. One tiny work — smaller than a sheet of printer paper — manages to catch the eye by imitating insect displays in natural history museums. "Afterlife," by Rachel Grobstein, appears to capture and categorize all sorts of biological and pop cultural matter: a football helmet, a lightning bolt, earthworms, an hourglass. Amidst the brightly-colored clutter, the tiny eyes of paper birds stare out at you.



Rachel Grobstein, "Afterlife," gouache, paper, pins

(As an aside, visitors should be warned that a warehouse filled with works on paper will, almost inevitably, contain an alarming excess of bird-related art. There are paint-splattered birds, birds on pots, bird silhouettes, birds on branches — and the list, regrettably, goes on. Art on Paper 2018 may remind some visitors of the *Portlandia* episode "[Put a Bird on It!](#)")

One unintended consequence of art fairs is the sudden tonal shift that can occur from one booth to another. In the span of five minutes, you might pass illustrated cats, hand-painted nudes, anti-fascist posters, and architectural sketches. Casual visitors may stroll past pretty landscapes, unprepared for works that trigger memories of oppression — like Alison Saar's "Cotton Eater" (2014), in which a dark-skinned pregnant woman, her eyes white and lacking pupils, eats cotton directly from the plant.



On the left is Alison Saar's "Cotton Eater" (2014) in the Tandem Press booth

Four works by [Megan Rye](#), "Foundling: Paintings Inspired by Adoption Referral Photographs" (2018), face a similar challenge. Rye has painted the portraits of young children on brown paper bags from Target, which are complete with the department store's red logo and the slogan "Expect More. Pay Less." Some passersby seemed to spot a jaunty juxtaposition, of a Pop Art variety — "How fun is that," one woman said to a fellow visitor — instead of a more sinister political point. But as the title suggests, these are children who are looking for parents. One somber interpretation of Rye's work is that, in the context of international adoption, children become commodities. Take one home today! Paper or plastic?



Megan Rye, "Foundling: Paintings Inspired by Adoption Referral Photographs" (2018)

The challenging lack of context may also explain the seeming popularity of five colorful prints by [Chuck Sperry](#), all depicting pale-skinned women in a style that channels Alphonse Mucha and 1970s rock posters. Though elegant at first glance, the prints uncritically celebrate the male gaze, reproducing perverse standards of "feminine" beauty: narrow waists, revealing clothing, light skin. Though Sperry previously circulated a free poster celebrating the Women's March, his works at Art on Paper seem tone-deaf in a year when the objectification and oppression of women has been on such flagrant display.



Five prints by Chuck Sperry

Thankfully, there were other and stranger aesthetics on proud display. [Gallery Toki-no-Wasuremono](#) and [Watanaki Ltd.](#) have created a particularly compelling booth, displaying colorful architectural prints alongside a huge black-and-white drawing by [Yusuke Koshima](#), which seems crowded with smoke. In the middle of a walkway, the artist [Will Kurtz](#) has installed "Mark," a paper man with an oversized head; he reclines awkwardly next to "Trash Can," which is filled with recent political and pop cultural waste.

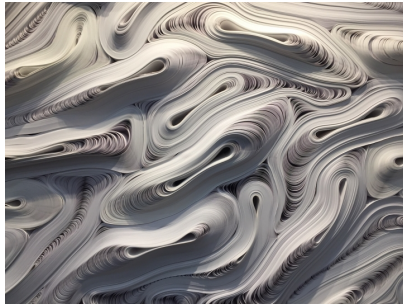


Will Kurtz, "Trash Can" and "Mark"

As if to sum up the show, "FLOW," a huge paper installation, confronts visitors who are about to leave the fair. Cordoned off behind a white line, the work from [Jae Ko's Force of Nature Series](#) provides tactile proof that paper, though sometimes light and airy, can have serious weight and substance. Her work has the rolls and folds of a topographical map, or the inside of an oversized printer, or a room full of crushed toilet paper rolls. Get too close and an attendant will call out, "Excuse me! Behind the white line!" The medium of paper, the work seems to say, can curve and curl into astonishing patterns and elegant curves. But there's a paper-thin line between elegance and unruliness. In the wrong hands, paper simply crumples, crinkles, and piles up.



Installation view of Jae Ko, "FLOW"



Detail of Jae Ko's "FLOW"

*Art on Paper continues at Pier 36
(299 South Street, Lower
Manhattan) through March 11.*