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The Best Art at Independent 20th Century

Now located in Marcel Breuer's iconic New York building, the art fair continues to champion the underappreciated and overlooked.

By Brian P. Kelly

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Forum Gallery's presentation Raphael Soyer at Independent 20th Century. FORUM GALLERY, NEW YORK

New York

Most art fairs aim to unearth talent from the vast number of artists toiling in obscurity today, but Independent 20th Century looks to the past in its search for creative gems. Moving this year to Marcel Breuer's masterpiece of a building on Madison Avenue, where Sotheby's recently relocated its New York headquarters, the fair mines that century to highlight underappreciated artists and overlooked aspects of well-known individuals' careers.

Strolling through the more than 50 exhibitors at this year's edition, it's sometimes clear why certain bodies of work have gone unremarked upon—as in science, not every artistic experiment yields a breakthrough. But there were revelations aplenty.



Raphael Soyer's 'Waiting at the Station' (c. 1941).
FORUM GALLERY, NEW YORK

Raphael Soyer (1899-1987) was an important member of the Fourteenth Street School, a group in New York that worked to depict the hardships of the everyman during the Great Depression. While other members like Kenneth Hayes Miller, Isabel Bishop and Reginald Marsh have retained their prominence, Soyer has not, a fact being rectified by Forum Gallery's mini-retrospective. What strikes you first are his scenes' forthright emotions—a group of women tearfully sending their beaux off to fight in World War II, the isolation of a young man dining alone at a

cafeteria. But as we look more closely we realize that not only has Soyer captured evocative moments documenting the realities of the rapidly changing world around him, he also actively contributed to that change by championing the strength of women at a time when second-wave feminism wasn't even a ripple. In another painting of soldiers departing, a woman sits stoically in a train station—she seems to either have just said goodbye or is preparing to. Nevertheless, she remains strong, her erect posture evincing her self-confidence that she is more than capable of managing the difficult time ahead.

At Bernard Goldberg Fine Arts, a pair of staggering wall hangings from the early 1920s by the husband-and-wife team of **William and Marguerite Zorach** (1889-1966 and 1887-1968) is in remarkable condition. The vibrant

shore scene, with swimming mermaids, sunbathing nudes, a whale spouting water and countless other enchanting details—all surrounded by a border teeming with geometric shapes and an aquarium of charming sea critters—is in such good shape because it had been commissioned by someone who lived in a lighthouse. Its rounded walls presented a difficulty hanging traditional art, and these curtain works provided a solution; the structure's lack of windows—and lack of natural light—provided the environment for the works' excellent preservation.



Voena's display of work by Mimmo Rotella. FAMIGLIA ROTELLA

Mimmo Rotella (1918-2006) took midcentury sensibilities in a new direction in the 1960s. This particularly productive decade is the focus of Voena's presentation that shows the Italian artist working with reclaimed advertising posters to create abstract *décollage* canvases that evolved to also include realist elements. In these works he blended the ethos of European Art Informel and Art Brut while also integrating Pop elements from that emerging American style. Later experiments with advertising posters, which presented test printings as stand-alone works of art, establish connections among Duchamp's Readymades, contemporaneous avant-garde movements like Fluxus and Nouveau Réalisme, and future creators like Jeff Koons.

Gomide&Co has staged an enlightening booth that expands diasporic scholarship by looking at Asian artists working in Latin America. Following

World War II, a wave of Japanese migration to the region, especially to Brazil, introduced East Asian aesthetics into local art scenes, and the new arrivals began drawing from their new environs. The fruits of this cross-cultural pollination are most visible in the work of **Akinori Nakatani** (1943-2023), whose ceramics take classical Japanese forms and were fired in a traditional *noborigama* kiln but are decorated with Mesoamerican designs and ornaments. The entire booth, which features many more artists, is truly fascinating, and the subject is ripe for a full institutional survey. That display, like the best at Independent 20th Century, offers discoveries that shouldn't end with the fair, but serve as new beginnings for overlooked and forgotten artists.

Independent 20th Century

Sotheby's New York, The Breuer, through Sept. 27

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