

"All the News
That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

Late Edition

Today, partial clearing, breezy, cooler, high 50. Tonight, partly cloudy, brisk, colder, low 32. Tomorrow, mostly sunny, seasonably cool, high 45. Weather map, Page A18.

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CHESTER HIGGINS JR./THE NEW YORK TIMES

The Armory Show The Chinese conceptualist Wang Du's "Image Absolve," a circle of 30 life-size white busts of Osama bin Laden at Laurent Godin, part of this art fair at Piers 92 and 94.

The Old New Here, the New New There

Many people think that art fairs represent the erosion of art by forces of the marketplace. I suggest that the opposite might be the case. Maybe art is using available systems of training, display and distribution, as well as artists themselves, for its own mysterious ends.

Maybe art arrived on earth long ago in the form of an intelligent virus that

turned people into artists on contact. Not everyone would have been susceptible, but some would, and through them — with the help of genetic mutation — art would propagate itself in forms appropriate to the social and historical development of its hosts.

This theory does not explain what art is trying to do beyond reproducing itself. But fortunately there are a number of art fairs going on this week in New York, which means there is a lot of new

art in town about which to speculate. The main attraction is The Armory Show at Piers 92 and 94. Here 228 dealers are presenting artworks in two different sections, one devoted to 20th-century art, the other to 21st.

In the Modern (20th-century) section, the alien virus theory will seem less plausible because most of what is there has been culturally assimilated and therefore looks familiar. Nevertheless there are some fine things, most notably

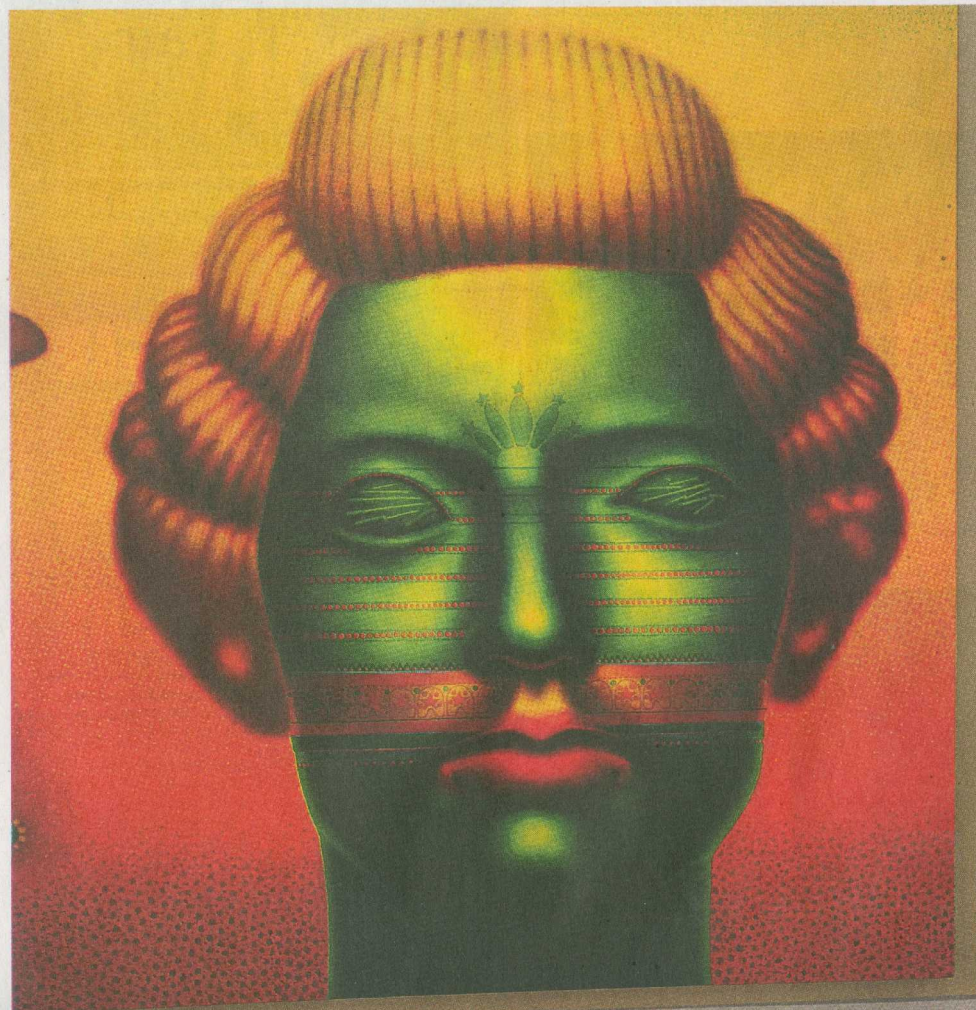
an excellent display of subtle, deceptively modest but tough still lifes and landscapes — paintings, watercolors and etchings — by the beloved Giorgio Morandi at Galerie d'Arte Maggiore.

Louis Stern has an excellent display of abstract, gridded, striped and curvy paintings by the California Modernists Karl Benjamin, John McLaughlin and Lorser Feitelson, while Carl Hammer is showing outsider artists like Henry Darger and Martín Ramírez and antic

and strange works by the Chicago Imagists Ed Paschke and Karl Wirsum.

"Girls, Girls, Girls," a jam-packed theme show at Chowaiki, includes sexy paintings by John Wesley, a Picasso "Weeping Woman" remade in powdered pigment and photographed by Vic Muniz, and a lovely little day-glo "Marilyn" in a purple frame by Andy Warhol. The Modern section's most im-

Continued on Page 30



Left, "Canal Cinco" by the Chicago artist Ed Paschke at Carl Hammer in the 20th-century section of the Armory Show. Carl Hammer is also showing work by the Chicago artist Karl Wirsum.

The Old New Here, the New New There

From Weekend Page 25

pressive female figure, however, is a giant, comical ceramic nude sitting at Nancy Hoffman: Viola Frey's "Seated Stubbish Woman, Orange Hands."

It is in the Contemporary (21st-century) section, where the newer work is in greater quantity, that you may sense something weird going on. The feeling is muted because exhibitors' cubicles are laid out in gridded blocks separated by long straight corridors. This gives the impression that art is under rational, top-down, human control. A truer image of art's collective action would be something resembling a big circle that is constantly expanding in all directions, as the known mutates and nibbles away at the great unknown, leaving in its wake what we call art history. Seen through another metaphor, artists on the outer edge are like ants, each busily doing his own thing and unknowingly contributing to a whole whose nature and purpose they and we can only guess at.

Rob Voerman's "Dawn of a New Century" at Upstream is emblematic. It is a bulbous, walk-in hut constructed of torn and battered pieces of cardboard cartons. Rough, projecting boxes frame small, green glass windows, creating a dusky, verdant light within, where you

The Armory Show continues through Sunday at Piers 92 and 94, at 12th Avenue at West 55th Street, Clinton; (212) 645-6440, thearmoryshow.com.



Viola Frey's ceramic sculpture "Seated Stubbish Woman, Orange Hands," shown at Nancy Hoffman.

can sit on a bench and have a shot of whiskey decanted from a bottle on a shelf at the entrance. Outside you see the remains of a gridded, partly burned structure with exposed red and yellow studs and flat gray panels: the order of

20th-century constructivism has given way to post-apocalyptic hive making. Green, we should bear in mind, is the color of new growth and hope.

Art in our time is attracted to our anxieties, which artists of the mid-20th

century tended to experience tragically. Now humor — mordant or zany — is the default mode. At Laurent Godin the Chinese conceptualist Wang Du displays a circle of 30 life-size white busts of Osama bin Laden. This is a topical one-liner, perhaps, but the title, "Image Absolue," is suggestive of something more. Bin Laden haunts contemporary imagination as a figure not only of evil but also of unwavering conviction. In modern secular society such purity of purpose is mystifying and frightening, yet some-

A contemporary scene in which humor, zany or mordant, seems to be the default mode.

how also compelling. Making him the butt of a joke does not entirely undo his lingering, enigmatic threat to Western complacency.

At Ambach & Rice the mode is hilarity. Eric Yahnker, a Los Angeles animator turned artist who has worked on "South Park" and other shows, presents a series of large drawings, including one of a Tyrannosaurus rex surfing called "Endless Summer." The walls surrounding the drawings are decorated with more than 300 used baseballs bearing forged autographs not of players of the game but of celebrities like Keanu Reeves, Leonard Cohen and Bill Cosby. Mr. Yahnker is working hard to stay ahead of the curve of ridiculousness in contemporary life.

One thing for certain is that art no longer advances exclusively within the

ONLINE: ART CITY

More images from art shows around New York City: nytimes.com/design

limits of traditional disciplines. There is a ton of painting here, and it is all over the place in stylistic terms, from the postcard size, photorealist pictures of nondescript suburban homes, stores and roadside signs by Mike Bayne at Mulherin to the big, colorful, Pop-Expressionist canvases of Bjarne Melgaard at Greene Naftali. Painting is far from dead; it just does not feel the need to progress linearly, and that is a good thing.

One of the most remarkable works here attempts to capture the evanescent in nature. At Sean Kelly, Leandro Erlich presents a natural-history-museum-style vitrine displaying nine diminutive clouds. He created these miniature atmospheric wonders by spraying white paint on plexiglass panels, which he then organized in groups of 15 aligned front to back. The layers visually coalesce into amazingly realistic, holographlike images. Each is labeled according to time and place — they were all supposedly observed in London — slyly satirizing the Enlightenment fantasy of encyclopedic omniscience.

The artist who probes nature directly with nothing but a brush or pencil is evidently rare these days, which makes the extraordinarily sensitive, small graph-



"The Tribute Monkey II" by Kehinde Wiley at Sean Kelly in the 21st-century section of the Armory Show.



"The Ugly Duckling" by Rina Banerjee at Nathalie Obadia.

ite drawings of outdoor scenes by Tom Fairs at K S Art all the more arresting. You could mistake them for studies by someone like Monet or Pissarro, but they were made from 1998 to 2004 by this little known British artist. They are a good reminder that the veil between what we know and what we don't know is always right in front of our eyes.