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2154 W. Division Street, Chicago, IL 60622
773.252.0299 www.moniquemeloche.com

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On the Piers, Armory Show Evokes Cut and Paste

By KEN JOHNSON
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The **Armory Show** Works by Romuald Hazoumè at the October Gallery exhibition on Pier 94, including a fanciful enhancement of a vehicle used by poor entrepreneurs to transport gasoline in the Republic of Benin. Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

After nearly four hours of scanning thousands of artworks displayed by the Armory Show's international roster of 205 exhibitors, I had an epiphany. A hypothesis about the nature of art making in the industrialized world took shape in my exhausted, overstimulated brain. I call it the "cut-and-paste" theory, which has to do not with actual scissors, paper and glue but with the actions people perform on Windows-equipped computers.

The idea was triggered by thinking about the differences between the two parts of the show: the "Modern" on Pier 92, where 59 dealers display "historically significant Modern art," and on Pier 94, the considerably more expansive "Contemporary," where 146 dealers are showing all kinds of shiny, newfangled products.

The Modern section is loaded with old favorites. Meredith Ward Fine Art has a selection of small works by American Modernists, including choice pieces by Arthur Dove, Elie Nadelman and Alfred Jensen. Mazzoleni Galleria d'Arte presents works by Italian avant-gardists like Lucio Fontana, Alighiero Boetti and Michelangelo

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Pistoletto. Allan Stone Projects offers an excellent solo show of paintings and drawings by the Pop-realist Wayne Thiebaud, including an electric, full-length portrait of a woman in a striped blouse and bell-bottom trousers from 1973-4.

Here and there, single works stand out. Andrew Edlin Gallery has a big, powerful painted relief by the self-taught artist Thornton Dial, featuring a fierce eagle with a bouquet of fake flowers in its talons. At Carl Hammer Gallery, Roger Brown's darkly comical painting of a horse hovering over a woman on her back under a sky of puffy clouds commemorates the apocryphal demise of Catherine the Great. At Ricco/Maresca, there's a large, mysterious drawing of empty courtyards and trains going through tunnels by another self-taught master, Martín Ramírez.

Styles may vary in the Modern section, but an idea of what making art involves is shared by most: It should be the expression of one person's singular vision.

In the Contemporary section, the typical artist is something else: a canny juggler of ready-made signifiers. Everywhere you look, you see artists mixing and matching generic styles, images and devices in the forms of photographs, paintings, high-tech simulations and myriad nontraditional materials, sometimes using all these at once. Almost always, they do so to cerebrally sophisticated ends, as often as not in order to riff on art itself.

An unusually appealing example of this type of work, at James Cohan Gallery, is an assemblage by Michelle Grabner, one of the Whitney Biennial's three curators this year. The basic structure is an eight-foot-wide disc made by patching together flattened pieces cut from shiny metal garbage cans. Hanging by a cable from the ceiling, it turns freely this way and that. Attached to the disc are small paintings of gingham patterns and of radiating lines. Also affixed are an oblong, round-ended slab of natural wood and a framed photograph of the artist's own backyard, in which a blurry rainbow arcs over unkempt grass in the foreground.

For all the impressive physicality of Ms. Grabner's piece, it's the puzzling interplay of disparate signs that matters most. The garbage cans, the gingham patterns, the natural wood plank and the backyard photograph variously evoke suburban nostalgia. Ms. Grabner is not pining for a lost way of life, however. Rather, she presents a mind-teasing, rebus-like constellation of sociologically suggestive icons for viewers to sort out and make sense of for themselves.

At the heart of this is a process of executive decision making. It's what you do on a computer when, by pointing and clicking and cutting and pasting, you move images out of different windows and bring them into relationships with one another in one window. My theory proposes that Microsoft Windows — in combination with the World Wide Web — has been the single greatest influence on artistic creativity of the past two decades.

If I'm right, this would account for the strange feeling of no context that prevails in contemporary art. A special section of the Contemporary wing is devoted to up-and-coming Chinese galleries. With the possible exception of a big, beautiful, expressionistic painting on paper of giant caterpillars on broad leaves by Chen Haiyan at Ink Studio, there's hardly anything in these booths that couldn't be mistaken for the work of a young Brooklynite. The world of today's artist is a virtual world; it's everywhere and nowhere.

In this context of no context, some things stand out. At moniquemeloche, a Chicago gallery, there's a series of photographs in muted color by Carrie Schneider, each of which pictures a young woman sitting in a comfortable chair or reclining on a sofa in her home and reading a visibly much-used book. These vaguely religious images of quiet absorption are a blessed relief from the fair's prevailing spirit of overeager, attention-seeking novelty.

Works by Romuald Hazoumè at October Gallery inventively address a set of urgently real problems in a particular part of the world. The centerpiece is a battered, rusty three-wheeled motor scooter equipped with a pair of outriggers, each carrying five large, round green glass bottles. This is a fanciful enhancement of a kind of vehicle used by poor entrepreneurs to transport gasoline in the Republic of Benin, where Mr. Hazoumè lives and works. The appalling back story has to do with how big oil companies extract and export petroleum from

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fields in neighboring Nigeria: They leave it to small, black-market operations to refine and sell dirty gasoline to the locals, who, while endangering themselves, transport and sell it in king-size wine bottles.

Not everyone needs to make art from such a deeply embedded position in real life. But wouldn't it be nice if more artists could choose to resist the sneakily hypnotic hegemony of Windows consciousness?

The Armory Show runs through Sunday at Piers 92 and 94, 12th Avenue at 55th Street, Manhattan; thearmoryshow.com. 212-645-6440.

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