

## Through the Looking Glass: Innovative Women Artists Who Reclaimed the Gaze At New York Armory Art Week

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*Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas – only I don't exactly know what they are!"*

*Carroll, Lewis. Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There (1871)*

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, the titular character from Alice in Wonderland once again returns to a magical, disorienting universe. Echoing her earlier adventures, this new journey finds Alice unwittingly drawn into a ritualistic chess match wherein she overcomes challenges to eventually transform into a Queen. While Alice had the luxury of navigating a fictive world, artists working in today's anti-feminist contemporary moment have no such luxury. In a bizarre return to the same struggles previous generations of women have mounted against oppressive legislation and derogatory slurs, feminist artists in today's art world find themselves navigating strangely familiar currents that seem to have emerged from our very own Carroll theater of the absurd. Armory Art week, with its many fairs, shows and events, was a veritable looking-glass into engaging artwork by the women navigating these currents. The triumphant works on view signaled new breakthroughs in contemporary art, marking

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the continued journeys of established artists and the upward trajectory of emerging artists. Through unique and ground-breaking art across mediums ranging from photography and video art to augmented reality, the sheer range of artistic practice at The Armory Show, Spring/Break Art Show, and more combined to create a potent and lasting impression.

Starting with a look into [VOLTA NY](#), [Joiri Minaya](#)'s video, [Siboney](#), invited viewers to re-imagine our trenchant post-colonial moment through gestures that both defied and obscured the patterns of a prosaic tropical wall mural. In contrast, [Rebecca Goyette](#) mounted a NSFW video re-imagining of Trump's now infamous dossier revelations which spurred disgust and delight in equal measure. The gory details of an alleged exposed liaison by our now President were played out in flagrant detail, ranging from props and oversexualized costumes to a wry portrait of Vladimir Putin. Moving from this potent political gesture to more introspective offerings, [Art on Paper](#) featured artists [Nathalia Edenmont](#), who painstakingly adorns women with natural flora resulting in ethereal portraits, and [Constance Edwards Scopelitis](#). Scopelitis awed with a subtle interactive video, a standout of the week. By gingerly inviting guests to interact with a simple finger swipe on the screen a vibrant new universe was delightfully revealed from a beneath a delicate winged figure.

[Spring/Break Art Show](#) naturally invited innovation, taking the top spot with three artists whose evocative work stole the show. [Signe Pierce](#) mesmerized with a one-of-a-kind, selfie-driven video based on a Times Square performance. [Leah Piepgras](#)' installation, Gateway, managed to be both introspective and spectacular, a rare feat in a contemporary art moment sustained by over-stimulation. [Erin Ko](#)'s virtual and augmented reality artworks examined identity and personal histories within holographic dreamlands. Meanwhile, at the Armory Show [Sean Kelly](#)'s [Shahzia Sikander](#) envisaged Persian miniatures for the new media age in her work *Disruption as Rapture*: a series of mesmerizing romantic visions of the past within a decidedly contemporary format.

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Armory Art week provided the opportunity to experience all of these compelling works: to gaze beyond the looking-glass of contemporary art's more conservative offerings and into a technicolor wonderland inhabited by artists spanning a wide range of influences from classical antiquity to Dadaism to [Pipilotti Rist](#) and [Cao Fei](#). Framing the female gaze across varied personal experience and identities, these artists have expanded how audiences experience feminism in contemporary art. From established artists with European roots to emerging artists based in America offering a post-colonial perspective, this delicate balance of selected artworks reveals an inspired and nuanced consideration of feminist topics and personal identity.



Joiri Minaya, *Siboney*, performance in two parts and mural, 2014, image courtesy the artist.

[Joiri Minaya](#): *Siboney*, [VOLTA NY](#)'s Your Body is a Battleground, curated by Wendy Vogel

Joiri Minaya's durational work, *Siboney*, unfolded over time as the artist created a mural based on found tropical imagery. Re-asserting the self against this stereotypical tropical imagery of the exoticized global South, Minaya's work managed to be both a powerful statement and a mesmerizing aesthetic experience. This statement manifested when Minaya's performance was considered against the traces of colonialism still blatantly present in the Dominican Republic, the artist's home country. One component of the piece touching on this postcolonial dialogue was the consideration of an artwork by Vela



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Zanetti of a dancing mulatta woman from the [Centro Leon museum](#) in Santiago, Dominican Republic. Minaya's labor in producing this tropical plant mural single-handedly is undermined when, after roughly a month of work, the artists pressed her wet body against the completed mural. The artist's latent presence within the finished artwork created an aggressive and forceful dissonance within the mural's overall pattern in the areas where her body has made contact. This re-assertion of the female body within these pre-existing patterns acted as an affront to established patterns of existence. The dual relationship between creation and destruction, native and foreign, formed the crux of the viewer's relationship to this work.



Rebecca Goyette feat. Brian Whiteley, *Golden Showers: A Sex Hex*, video, 2017, image courtesy the artists.

[Rebecca Goyette](#): *Golden Showers: Sex Hex*, [Freight + Volume](#) at [VOLTA NY](#)

Rebecca Goyette is one artist who is well acquainted with pushing boundaries. Renowned for her provocative performance art practice which is fearlessly feminist in nature, her performances incorporate the use of alter egos and pageantry to comment on women's rights and censorship in our current political climate. Holding a BFA from RISD and a Master's in Fine Art from the School of Visual Arts in New York City, Goyette has developed her career through careful considerations of gender constructions and sociopolitical context. Last year Goyette brought her exhibition, *Ghost Bitch*, to Freight + Volume:



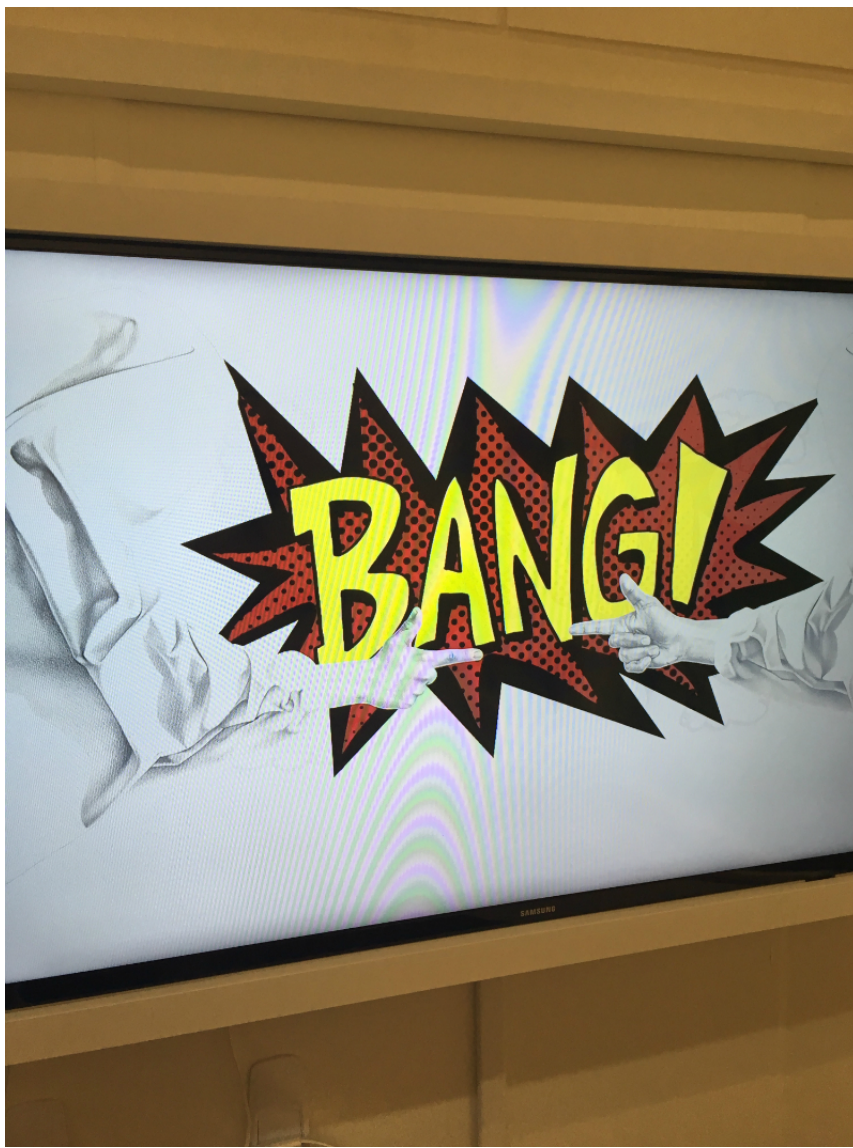
sexually explicit and unrepentantly powerful, the crux of the exhibit revolved around repressed sexuality, religion and the occult. VOLTA NY presented Goyette with a platform to unveil her newest video piece, *Golden Showers*, with Freight + Volume. A witty and dramatic look into the visceral (and disturbing) ventures of the US President's alleged trysts in a Russian hotel room, *Golden Showers* questioned Narrative's relationship to truth, and whether staged performances should be considered vastly different from "alternative facts." The video featured prostitutes plying their trade on a bed with a certain presidential character, complete with various bodily fluids and overtly sexual costumes and gestures. Above the bed a portrait of Vladimir Putin gazed out toward the viewer, questioning both the visitor's presence and his own implicated role in the unfolding scene. Prescient and hypnotizing, Goyette's hyper-sexualized performance and the incorporation of queer voices in this re-imagined historical event emphasized the potent force of agency in contemporary social commentary.



Nathalia Edenmont, *Deep in Thought*, C-Print, 2015 image courtesy the artist and Nancy Hoffman gallery.

[Nathalia Edenmont](#): *Force of Nature*, [Nancy Hoffman Gallery](#) at [Art on Paper](#)

Edenmont's lush portraits enchanted visitors to Nancy Hoffman gallery during Armory Art week while manifesting the pivotal relationship between the female body and nature. Originally from the Soviet Union, Edenmont currently lives in Sweden and drew from a diverse array of influences for her life-size portrait series on display throughout the gallery's booth for Art on Paper. The artist's large scale portraits of women engulfed within sweeping constructions of organic materials (flowers, vegetables, and fauna) directly challenged the cringe-worthy enduring stereotype of women as fragile china dolls. Literally supplanting this ideology, Edenmont selected and arranged her figures donning plant matter as regal finery, rooting her figures firmly to the earth. The artist pulled from the technical proficiency of Old Masters, modern collage and fine art photography in equal measure. Painstaking and meticulous in their precision, these photographs inspired awe that was only magnified in the revelation that the artist eschewed Photoshop, deciding instead to create the completed scene by hand and capture it with a camera in real time. The artist constructed a visual vocabulary responding to ancient Greek and Roman sculpture and Alphonse Mucha, carefully and delightfully reconsidered through the female gaze. Edenmont's empowered portrait subjects were imbued with nobility and serenity through the the artist's keen attention to material and composition.



Constance Edwards Scopelitis, Bang Bang, video installation with sound component, 2016, image courtesy the author.

[Constance Edwards Scopelitis](#), included in “Athena Shrugged” by [Long-Sharp Gallery](#), [Art on Paper](#)

Drawing from a classical lexicon with an eye toward contemporaneity, Scopelitis’ videos which were on view at Art on Paper aptly incorporated an unfinished feel, echoing sketches on paper. The artist asserted women artists’ place in art history by incorporating renowned sculptor Isabel Bishop’s winged figure into her video work, *Peace*, exhibited as part of Long-Sharp’s exhibit *Athena Shrugged*. Scopelitis’ classical training in figurative painting was recently augmented by the Lilly Foundation’s Creative Renewal grant when the artist expanded her practice, venturing into interactive video work. Adapting figuration for our current

social media age, Peace and the artist's other video work which was displayed with Long-Sharp gallery, *Bang Bang*, combined elements of sound, touch and light to create a storytelling experience for viewers. By layering these multiple elements within humanist compositions, these works retained a delicately poignant feel despite the bright patterns of color (representing different regions of the world) emerging from the winged figure in Peace alongside flying white doves. Inspiring a creative and engaging experience for viewers, Scopelitis' work exuded creativity and innovation while absorbing and re-contextualizing the artist's traditional figure painting roots.

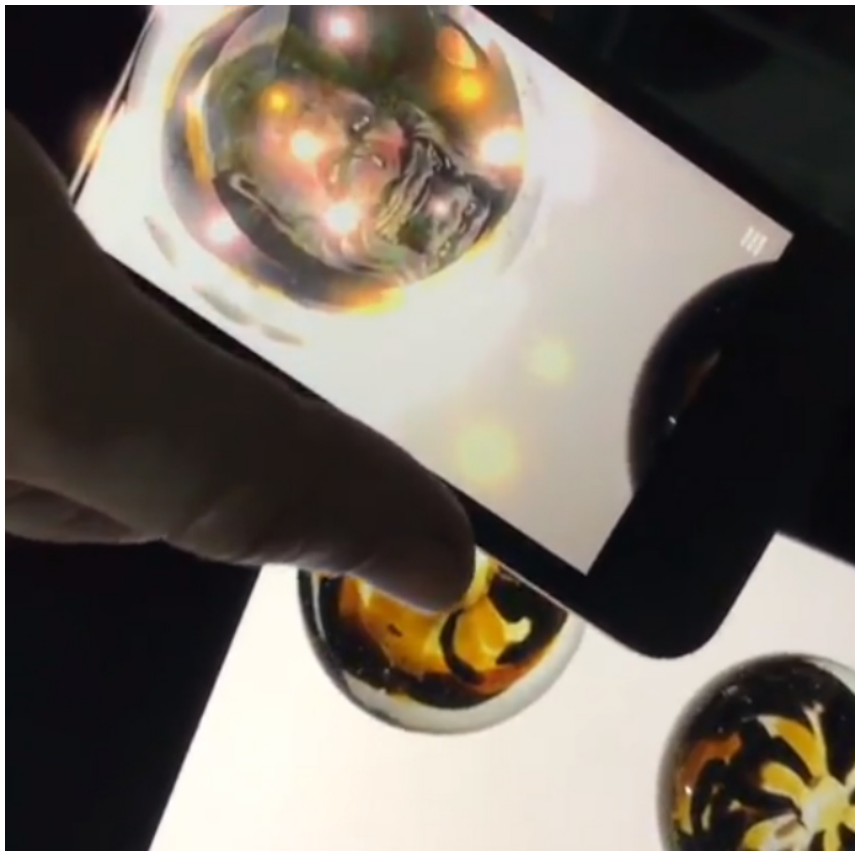


Signe Pierce, *Reality is a Porno and Life is But a Meme* (installation view), performance piece and 360 degree video, 2016, image courtesy the artist.

[Signe Pierce](#), included in “The Pursuit of “It” ” at [Spring/Break Art Show](#)



Pierce lured the viewer through the lurid rabbit hole existing at the intersection of self-absorption and fantasy. Placing her body (clad in high heels and a nude one-piece bodysuit) in Times Square with a 360 degree selfie camera documenting her every move, the artist enticed audiences while creating a reality-fueled, mobius strip-like loop of activity. Titled *Reality is a Porno and Life is But a Meme*, the video piece was performed by the artist with the help of a newly-created “selfie-stick headpiece” generated by the artist and engineer Jeff Jingle. The headpiece reveals the repetitive and ultimately empty action of generating a view of the self through multiple constructed gazes, generating a presentation of identity through angles selected by the subject. Echoing the female gaze and complicating this view with the use of cutting-edge technology, Pierce questioned ideas of ownership and how contemporary society constructs modern identity. Do our identities lie in the snapshots and selfies we reveal with others? Are undocumented moments within our daily lives no longer relevant if audiences have no stake in these actions, if they are not revealed through social performance? Holding a BFA from the School of Visual Arts in Photography and Performance Art, Pierce’s artworks span performance, creative direction, video and .gif / web-based art. Her 2014 short film *American Reflexxx* revealed the reactions of passersby in Myrtle Beach, SC as she strolled scantily clad on a boardwalk: an act which resulted in the artist being assaulted by strangers. The artist’s engagement with modern sexuality and female empowerment plays out through her wry and interdisciplinary approach.



Erin Ko, *Seed Bank*, Sculpture with Augmented Reality element, 2017, image courtesy the artist.

[Erin Ko](#), included in “Personal Tesseract”, curated by [Anne Spalter](#) at [Spring/Break Art Show](#)

Flying through pulsing orbs of light reminiscent of launching light years away into space, Ko’s artwork introduced a transformative virtual reality experience to visitors in *Are We There Yet?* as part of “Personal Tesseract” at Spring/Break Art Show. Guided through the VR artwork by a volunteer, the encounter included a movement component where the participant was able to control the speed and direction of these elements as they careened through the virtual universe. Eventually the volunteer pointed out that figures from the participant’s past may emerge, and that by altering one’s posture and position one could create a closer encounter with these figures (nondescript beings of light positioned in various activities). Ko revealed that both this work and augmented-reality piece, *Seed Bank* (a sculpture incorporating 12 palm-sized “seeds” with augmented reality components), were based on ideas of individual identity, and how these roles are constructed, lost and reconstituted over time. The images revealed within the AR in *Seed Bank*

placed the artist's own artistic and creative influences within each individual seed, with Hindu imagery existing comfortably alongside modern European masterworks. The notion of individual identity and how it is formed and shared with others are key to Ko's empowering and introspective works.



Leah Piepgras, *Gateway*, Site specific installation, 2017, image courtesy the author.

[Leah Piepgras](#): *Gateway*, [GRIN Contemporary](#) at [Spring/Break Art Show](#)

Piepgras' interactive installation as part of GRIN Contemporary's showing at Spring/Break Art Show straddled visceral, emotional and cerebral aspects latent in experiencing art. A multi-faceted entryway into notions of humanity as a shared experience, manifesting positivity for a better future and reflecting on the paradoxes that shape us as individuals, Piepgras constructed a multi-channel platform through which visitors could engage with *Gateway*. Surrounding the visitor were light-reflective fragments engulfing various shapes constructed of wood, plaster, and clay. Forming a holistic whole along with a plaster ear-covered "stupa" in the room's near center and a dark "pool"/black hole composed of non-reflective epoxy resin, the visitor was immersed in a universe of literal self-reflection while pondering the spectacle arising from the

light thrust throughout the room by the movement of these various reflective fragments. The intersection of self and other was implicit in the interacting reflections cast by these various elements, as was the recognition that one is intrinsically linked with the physical elements found throughout the universe: stars, planets and dark matter. Notions of metaphysical transformation, meditation, and manifestation were central to Piepgras' imagining of the space as an area for reflection and evolution, creating a positive echo chamber for each individual viewer. Piepgras holds an MFA from Carnegie Mellon University and has been featured in the Boston Globe and New York Times, among other outlets.



Shahzia Sikander, *Disruption as Rapture*, 2016, image courtesy the author.



Sikander is an established Pakistani artist whose video piece, *Disruption as Rapture*, anchored Sean Kelly Gallery's booth at this year's Armory Show. A prolific artist and recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship, Sikander's background as an artist began studying Persian miniatures at the National College of Arts Lahore in Pakistan before continuing her education at the Rhode Island School of Design with an MFA in Painting and Printmaking. This attention to detail and multidisciplinary approach is apparent in her masterful video work, shifting between suggested scenes of a mythic narrative or imagined reality. Figures lifted from traditional Persian miniatures flutter between screens, overlapping one another, multiple scenes and various objects which float and vanish on a whim. Relationships grow and decay, then re-develop in subsequent scenes, all while colorful motifs spiral throughout the images. Ancient objects and architecture frame these non-journeys: the viewer is just as engrossed in the emergence of plant life and various inanimate objects through the scenes on display as they are with the characters' actions. The HD video animation lasts ten minutes and seven seconds but spans lifetimes and journeys, with characters embracing one another, suffering loss and revelling in joy while freed from any but the most abstract concept of storyline. Sikander's evident attention to detail in color and composition, as well as the added complexity of choreographing the movement and objects and beings through space, combine to create an experience unparalleled throughout any of the Armory week exhibitions. Challenging notions of roles women play within traditional society by recontextualizing these stylized scenes within the firmly contemporary medium of video animation, Sikander expands on how viewers encounter the exotic within now universally familiar frameworks.

Now more than ever, in an era where human rights and gender equality are under attack in this bizarre atmosphere of censorship and human rights abuses, it is heartening to see innovative artists from a range of backgrounds

producing relevant and meaningful feminist art. Engaging video artwork and ethereal photography combined to construct an insightful and imaginative dialogue, generating a new appreciation for contemporary feminism. Audiences to the various exhibits at this year's Armory Art week were privy to what was arguably the greatest presence of inventive, exceptional artwork (created by artists who just so happen to be women) on display during the Armory art show period to-date. It's this expanded view that incorporates a more balanced gender perspective, along with the continued inclusion of other diverse voices including our women-identifying and non-gender conforming colleagues, that will drive meaningful conversation forward and provide greater opportunity for stunning works embracing multiple viewpoints. Similar to the restrictions imposed on Alice in her bizarre parallel universe behind the looking glass, as creative professionals and cultural consumers we owe it to ourselves to navigate these strange times as best we can to liberate ourselves from outdated, entrenched viewpoints. This will prove crucial as we continue to liberate the female gaze, re-positioning it firmly from the sidelines to center field and witnessing the opportunity emerge to develop a better balance of perspectives throughout contemporary art practice. The perceptive methods by which diverse artists and cultural leaders utilized this year's Armory Art week as a crucial platform to address our changing socio-political climate, as well as artists' evolution in their technical practice to reflect changing audiences, was an enlightening and inspirational encounter. Challenging notions that feminism has become irrelevant through diverse, thought-provoking artworks, the exhibitions on view during Armory art week offered a much needed view back into what should be the "real" world from this current looking-glass world's reality, offering an empowering and enduring means of escape back to relative sanity.

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