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Life in the Arts Lane - Week 47 - Caravan in New York

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I am in New York, and yes, I am visiting another art fair- this one is the International Fine Art and Antique Dealers Show, New York. We are in Park Avenue at the 7th regiment Armory, that wonderful fusion of the martial with the apogee of American Art Nouveau. The Tiffany rooms are one the great sweeps of design on the planet. This is the big season in the 'The Big Apple', and everyone is now here. There are the major 'fall' sales going up at Christie's and Sotheby's in a week or so, where the signature lots of the season will be sold. Christie's have secured for sale the Francis Bacon triptych, 'Three Studies of Lucian Freud' dating back to 1969, and Sotheby's have Andy Warhol's 1963 'Silver Car Crash (Double Disaster)'. It will be a true clash of the titans.



At the Armory fair there are a few dealers who had stands in Hong Kong, then London and now here in Manhattan, and they are a tough, hard-bitten crew indeed. They take no prisoners. Like old school rodeo stars, their myriad tumbles have given them world weariness, but also a strength and resilience. They retain their sense of enthusiasm for another ride- a 'back in the saddle!' approach. They smile and are as enthusiastic as ever.

The fair itself is dark and serious with the traditional line of aisles with brightly lit treasures on show. The famous doors are as heavy as ever and as you heave and force your way in, you feel on familiar ground. The opening is splendid and glittering. The dealers are elegant, suited and tied, and talk in hushed tones about their offerings. The clients look around and kiss their friends and quaff and consume as enthusiastically as possible. The mood is jovial, friendly, even collegiate.



Afterwards, I dine with a museum friend and he has ordered in a veritable sea of sushi. Sadly we toy with our food, sated by fair goodies. We drift off home tired and full of the impressive grandeur of another show in the Armory. The next day Nazy, Masterpiece Chief Executive and I go down to one of our Masterpiece exhibitors Leila Heller. She is promoting the work of dandy photographer, Ike Ude. There is a gallery talk and lunch at the relatively newAmericano hotel round the corner. The group is passionate, eclectic and engaged. The artist is definitely peculiar, but in a good way. We admire the eccentricity of his vision and then dine. I sit next to an amazing authoress who is delving into the complexities of Iranian

women and their history. She has memories of both the Shah and his aftermath. I have rarely met anyone who expressed such a sober, calm and patient attitude to the perceived need for change.

The day ended with a dinner just off Canal Street in a new restaurant with my ex-colleague and now successful dealer in mid-century design, Nick, and his amazing wife. She is re-defining photography and teaching a class. The restaurant is buzzing. It has only been open a fortnight and all the staff are as keen as mustard to help us have a good time. The day could not have been a more stark counterpoint to the previous. Not simply youth versus age or even knowledge versus learning but actually more a difference of approach. The day was full of optimism for the unknown, the adventure ahead. It is not a question of commitment or scholarship. It is not a question of price or business process. It is fundamentally a question of optimism.

In Chelsea, the mood is very intense, amid the 'bruhaha', the bars, the restaurants and at the highline you have all the big contemporary galleries. People come to look and they come to buy. Chelsea has a confidence that Uptown lacks. Every gallery in Chelsea has a polished concrete floor, white walls which don't quite touch the floor. Lights sparkle and glass windows are expansive.

However there is a very surprising sense of conventionality compared to Uptown. The art in Chelsea is varied but the framework is formulaic. Uptown, by contrast, the variety and colours are hugely diverse. No two stands look the same. Russian marble consoles from the late 18th century sit alongside Impressionist paintings, which in turn sit beside fabulous jewels or silver. If originality and interest are what you are seeking, then search no further. The reality is that the galleries in Chelsea are rammed, and the Armory is not.

We decide to take a trip to Brooklyn and visit Prime Meats in Court Street. After taking the rumbling, infrequent train walk down the low-rise leafy streets to arrive in a corner restaurant which could almost be an English pub. We are welcomed heartily despite being nearly a half an hour late, and we dive into what they call 'bloody Maria's butch', which I know as a 'Mexican Mary'. Fabulous, fruity, spicy Bloody Marys, but made with tequila as the lighter fluid. A great start. Then burgers, with fat crunchy bacon that tastes of pork rather the crispy saltiness one usually finds, and soft, tender pickles which have an aroma of herbs and spices as well as traditional vinegar. We finish with a cliché, cheesecake. This is a really classic cheesecake that sticks to your teeth and has a crunchy salty sweet biscuit base. All accompanied by New York State sweet white wine that scintillated with a burnt raisin taste that enhanced the cheesecake beyond measure.



After lunch, we wander the area, taking in the extraordinary difference between the local scene and the intense bustle half an hour away on the train. We stopped by a junk shop and one of our group bought a little cast iron stand with a marble top, which he was going to use as a table in his apartment. The sun was warm and the streets wide. We felt as if we were having a weekend away in the Cotswolds. Admittedly it was a slightly dystopia-like view. Looking down side streets there were terrible sights of industrial wastelands. However, the parallel streets of Court and Smith were charming and full of interest.

We sped back to the city to meet with a friend from Sotheby's. He is such a delight. Eager, enthusiastic, prone to tears in front of art, he is the kind of person who makes others fall for the art world. Despite having been worn ragged by constant work, his eyes still widen with his passion for it all. We eat at the Trump Hotel, the Jean Georges, where a civilised fusion of peekytoe crab and a smoked salmon carpaccio helped by a few glasses of not-too-cold Sancerre end the week for us.

