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Six years ago, when it started out, the art fair called Independent really was sort of that. It had a cool guerrilla buzz. In the former Dia headquarters on West 22nd Street in Chelsea, it was tiny compared with the cattle-call Armory Show. More rebelliously, admission was free. And the look was new. Instead of booths the size of stockyard stalls, there were wide-open prairies of exhibition space on all three floors. Within these democratic vistas, you could hardly tell where one gallery ended and another began.

Democracy is fine and independence is fun, but they don't pay for the farm, so things changed. Now there's an entry fee (\$20) and many more partition walls than there were of yore, enough so that some gallery spaces are all but self-enclosed. Despite such bows to convention, though, one thing is the same: Independent still feels more like an art experience than a shopping experience, and that sets it apart from the competition.

What accounts for the atmosphere? For one thing, less-is-more is the prevailing style. Sparsely hung spaces at least suggest that you're looking at art, not inventory. Traces of neighborliness linger on. You have to pass through galleries to get to others, which means you see pretty much everything in the show whether you mean to or not.

The relatively relaxed and uncompetitive vibe encourages a degree of visual subtlety. The black-on-black North Atlantic landscape paintings of Silke Otto-Knapp at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, for example, might have been swallowed up on the Piers: Here they do just fine. So do the abstract, delicately detailed sculptures of the young Los Angeles artist Matt Paweski at Herald St., one of six London galleries this year.

Possibly the geographic breakdown of the fair's 50 participants might make a revealing



study in art fair demographics. New York, of course, dominates, but Berlin, with 11 galleries, comes in a strong runner-up. Is it significant that Los Angeles has only three galleries and Mexico City the same? Or that no African, Asian or Australian galleries are in the mix at all? To my eye, at least, such statistics mean little, since, in an era of global pluralism, everything here could come from almost anywhere within a Euro-American sphere. This gives Independent a somewhat clubby look — there may be galleries from 14 countries, but everyone speaks the same visual language — which is the not-so-fabu-

lous flip side of neighborliness.

Anyway, in the end you'll come away with memories of what you liked best (or least), some of it familiar, some not. On the second floor, JTT, a young gallery from the Lower East Side — and one of 16 first-time Independent exhibitors — opens the show on a solid, no-nonsense note with a beaconlike sculpture made from a truck tire balanced on a column of stones by Charles Harlan. Nearby, Elizabeth Dee, who founded the fair with Darren Flook, has strong pieces by three veteran artists Mac Adams, John Giorno and Julia Wachtel. And the Box, from Los Angeles, highlights 1960s work — tiny, vaguely sinister assemblages of seashells, broken dolls and severed bird wings — by Barbara T. Smith, an early West Coast feminist artist who should be far better known in New York than she is.

Further on, at Canada, another undersung figure, the conceptualist painter Gerald Ferguson, who taught at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design for decades and committed suicide in 2009, has what amounts to a full-fledged show of late abstract landscapes done in black house paint on plain canvas. Galeria Agustina Ferreyra Gallery, from San Juan, Puerto Rico, goes for high color and high energy in a wraparound installation of paintings by Adriana Minoliti, from Buenos Aires. Closer to home — Greenpoint, Brooklyn — Real Fine Arts, a stimulating place, mixes intensely marketable abstract painting (Jon Pestoni, Ned Vena) with more interestingly kooky and no doubt harder to sell sculpture: a life-size, purple, faux-fur Cookie Monster-ish figure by Stefan Tcherpnin and bust-length heads combining alpaca wool, metal spikes and “nonorganic garbage” by Mathieu Malouf.

Plan B, a gallery with branches in Berlin and Cluj, Romania, has made an impression at the Armory Show in the past and is worth a visit on its first Independent appearance. The gallery has brought just two artists. Navid Nuur, originally from Tehran, now living in Europe, makes both modular sculptures and crusty, glowing paintings that swirl with calligraphic lines. These are complemented by the paintings of a younger artist, Achraf Touloub, born in Morocco, who turns similarly swirling lines into tree trunks and branches that look both realistic and unnaturally continuous, like arabesques.

Old and new, alike and different, are braided together on the third floor. Labor from Mexico City and Supportico Lopez from Berlin — share a space and a single artist, Jan Peter Hammer, with Labor also representing the estimable Pedro Reyes and Nicholas Mangan, who is in the New Museum's 2015 Triennial. Two other galleries connect “outsider art” dots both from across the Atlantic and from opposite sides of the fair's third-floor space. Galerie Susanne Zander/Delmes & Zander in Germany are showing cosmic diagrams by the psychologically troubled German artist Harald Bender (1950-2014), while Chelsea's own White Columns has a cache of erotic Rapidograph fantasies by the New Yorker Anthony Ballard (1945-2008), who was schizophrenic and exhibited at Fountain House in New York.

Mendes Wood DM, a gallery from São Paulo, has a solo by the Brazilian artist who uses the gender-free moniker f.marquespenteadó (full first name: Fernando). He says that he works best when permitted “to occupy an entire space.” And so he does here, creating an environment of paintings, drawings, embroideries and collages that serve as a stage set for a multicharacter narrative about masculine stereotypes and how they thwart the path of true same-sex love.

A debut Independent appearance by the Mexico City gallery Kurimanzutto brings a rare visit from the long-expatriate American artist Jimmie Durham in the form of a 2007 installation, “The Sacred, the Profane and Everything Else.” The piece, which incorporates seven metal oil drums, suggests a combination of altar and industrial no-go zone and refers to, among other things, death, Rome (where it was first shown) and the worldwide battle for fuel. A couple of battered suitcases folded into the mix read as stand-ins for the artist himself, politically alienated from his homeland and always on the global move.

On the fourth floor, you'll find some of the quietest work, and some of brashest. Ms. Otto-Knapp's penumbral landscapes are here. So is a geometric corner mural painting by Lydia Okumura, its form made three dimensional by strings stretched, like drawn lines, between two walls at Broadway 1602. Not that a sculptural extension in painting is necessarily abstract. The same gallery has a 1963 Pop picture by Marjorie Strider (1934-2014) of a pinup model with a seductive smile

and 3-D breasts. Directly across from it, at Thomas Erben, is a large pieced-together text painting by Mike Cloud, color-rich, rough-surfaced, annotated and argumentative. And not far away in a niche-like area occupied by the Modern Institute from Glasgow, murals by Nicolas Party — huge Modernist squiggles and a gargantuan grisaille version of Picasso's 1904 walleied "La Celestine" — cover the wall from floor to high ceiling and are themselves covered over by superimposed pictures of still lifes.

What Mr. Party's installation is exactly about, I can't say, but I remember with some pleasure another he created at Salon 94 Freemans on the Lower East Side in 2012. That one was called "Dinner for 24 Dogs" and featured a big round table with two dozen customized place settings in an every-inch-painted room. With respectful nods to Matisse, Judy Chicago and Rirkrit Tiravanija's cooking-as-art, the piece was artful, eye-catching, conservative and companionable, all of which Independent is, too.