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This Art Failed to Sell. Then It Got a Line Down the Block

By Annie Armstrong



Installation view of "This artwork did not sell." at Maxwell Graham. Photo by Annie Armstrong.

TAKING STOCK

In my years of reporting on the art market, I've seen sales tactics that range from sealing deals only after three to four martinis to blindly Airdropping .PDFs at expensive hotels—in our industry, anything goes.

A new approach debuted this week in Manhattan's Chinatown, where the Maxwell Graham gallery hosted an opening with a disarming title: "This artwork did not sell." The language in its press release is mostly simple and straightforward, though with a gnomic conclusion: "This is a group exhibition at the gallery consisting of artwork that did not sell in solo exhibitions at the gallery. The artwork in this group exhibition is installed exactly where it was installed in solo exhibitions. The decisions of selection and the decisions of installation are deferred to previous decisions."

A huge crowd appeared at the Wednesday night opening to see art that didn't sell the first time around, and according to the gallery, there have never been more requests for a show's price list. How's that for Freakonomics?

"There were both internal and external catalysts for organizing a group of artworks in this way," Graham told me by phone, from the Hester Street space his business has called home since 2017. Internally, it was a chance to stage a curatorial experiment. Externally, it was "related to the effects and inspirations of patronage," he said.

“We started with a list of everything that was ever shown at this gallery space that didn’t sell, but that wasn’t on loan, or otherwise unavailable, and mapped out a model of all the overlapping artworks,” he said. “We didn’t want artworks to overlap or block one another, so we had to make some choices, and these were done on the basis of trying to be as inclusive of the broadest survey of exhibitions here.”

Those visiting the gallery without any context are in for a fairly confounding viewing experience. Three photographs by Cora Pongracz are mounted in precise, equal distances from each other, but their rhythm is interrupted by a multimedia piece by John Miller and a painting by Jef Geys. On the floor, Jay Chung and Q Takeki Maeda’s *Bad Driver* series from 2021 suggests a classroom setting, which is thrown out of whack by Lewis Stein’s velvet rope and garbage-can readymades from the 1970s.

It’s dizzying to walk through, but viewed from a distance, there’s a distinctive, Cady Noland-esque cogency. “There are many artworks in this exhibition that are very strong, very irregular statements, that I wanted to experience again,” Graham said.

As I said, the opening was packed, with many fans of the gallery returning to revisit Anna Rubin’s entropic video *Super Gift* (2024), which she showed there just this past fall. The artist Chloe Wise was on hand, and I asked her how she would feel about participating in a show of unsold work. “The idea of foregrounding the market component of a gallery exhibition is so gauche that it becomes gorgeous,” she said. “There’s some satisfaction in acknowledging, reclaiming, and then repackaging the shared disappointment of unsold work.”

Also present was veteran dealer Jay Gorney, who was enthusiastic about the exhibition. “The show has a whiff of Michael Asher,” he told me over the phone. “There’s an interesting juxtaposition with the sort of cerebral, complex work with something as nuts-and-bolts as ‘these works didn’t sell.’ I think it’s very funny, and very witty.”

From what I can tell, the market slump that has endured for over a year now is not ending anytime soon. But artists and dealers who are following their instincts and taking risks, rather just chasing easy sales, seem to be weathering the storm. Take note.