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Photography Curator Dan Leers Walks through the AIPAD Fair

by Leigh Anne Miller

"I've been coming to AIPAD for eight years," said Dan Leers, as he perused this year's Association of International Photography Art Dealers (Apr. 16-19) exhibitor list at the entrance to the show. Leers, who starts his new job as the curator of photography at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh at the end of the month, first came to the fair in 2007, the year he began a four-year stint as a curatorial fellow at the Museum of Modern Art. After teaching at the School of Visual Arts and Vassar College, Leers has been working as a freelance curator for the past two years.

In 2013 he put his expertise in contemporary African art to good use when he traveled to Senegal, Nigeria and South Africa as an advisor to Massimiliano Gioni, curator of the last Venice Biennale. "When it comes to African art, you take what you can get at the fairs," Leers observed toward the end of our visit. This year, for its 35th edition, AIPAD brought 89 exhibitors from the U.S., Canada, Europe, Asia and South America—but none from Africa—to the Park Avenue Armory.

"This fair feels more like a group of like-minded individuals coming together, since it's organized by the dealers and not by an events group," Leers said as we walked into yesterday's fair preview. "AIPAD appeals to the photography geek side of me. There are racks to flip through, which makes you feel like you could discover something new."

"It's interesting to see what meets you front and center." This year it's New York dealer Howard Greenberg's spacious booth. Walking up to a Bruce Davidson photo of a young

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man on the subway, Leers remarked that he's been thinking about curating a show on the topic of transportation. Hanging on the outside of Greenberg's booth is a series (ca. 2012) of photos by Thomas Roma, who has shot churches, people on the subway and, in this case, shadows of dogs in a dog park, all in Brooklyn. "I really admire Roma's commitment to place," Leers commented. "He shows Brooklyn through so many different lenses."

Next up was Robert Mann, who is showing contemporary Cuban photography as a companion show to "The Light in Cuban Eyes," currently on view at the dealer's Chelsea gallery. Mann had been working on the exhibition for nearly a year, so the timing, given recent news reports about thawing U.S.-Cuban relations, was fortuitous. "We had more than 12 artists from Cuba at the opening," gallery director Caroline Wall remarked.

"Another idea I've been thinking about for a while is the moon," Leers said, walking into Sasha Wolf Gallery's somber navy-walled booth. On the right, Wolf had six prints—photograms and chemograms—from Caleb Charland's new series "Penumbra." The young Maine-based artist experiments with materials like baking soda, votive candles and glow in the dark powder to make his eerie prints.

As we strolled down the aisles, Leers zeroed in on a photograph in the corner of Steven Kasher Gallery's somewhat chaotically installed booth. **"This is one of my all-time favorite pictures," he said, pointing out *Butterfly Boy (1949)*—Jerome Liebling's portrait of an African-American child in shorts, a cap and a wool coat buttoned only at his neck. "I can just imagine the photographer asking the kid a question, and him shrugging," Leers said, mimicking the boy's playful pose with his hands in his pockets, his coat fluttering open.**

At Yossi Milo, Leers closely examined a new series of prints by Marco Breuer, observing the trend of cameraless abstract art. Breuer, Milo explained, was continuing his experimentation with manipulating photographic paper. Whereas before he folded and scraped it in a seemingly overworked way, these new works are more loose and gestural,

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created by exposing narrow strips of the paper to light and scraping or embossing away the rest of the photo-sensitive material to reveal white grounds.

Both Leers and I were wowed by a diorama photo of Tokyo by Sohei Nishino at the London-based dealer Michael Hoppen's booth. Nishino, Hoppen explained, considers himself a mapmaker, not an artist. His labor intensive process involves spending four to six weeks in each city, shooting some 5,000 images on 500 rolls of film, and then taking three months in his studio to reassemble the photos into a teeming, hyper-detailed portrait of an urban metropolis. Next up: Johannesburg.

At the booth of the Chicago gallery Stephen Daiter, Leers was drawn to Dawoud Bey's new "Birmingham" series, which commemorates the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church (four girls died in the church, and two black boys were shot to death later that day as victims of racial violence). The six diptychs each show current Birmingham residents: a girl (or boy), the same age as each child who was murdered in '63, paired with a woman or man the age that each child would be today. Bey's photos were shot in a local church as well as at the Birmingham Museum of Art which, a gallery staffer pointed out, used to be segregated so that black people could visit only one weekday a month.

Before Leers and I parted ways, we stopped by Yancey Richardson's booth to admire three portraits by Zanele Muholi, one of the stars of the 2013 Carnegie International. (The South African photographer won that year's Fine Prize, given to an emerging artist, and has a show opening at the Brooklyn Museum May 1.) "I saw her give a talk at MoMA," Leers remembered. "She's so committed. She talked about her project as an archive, as a way to record South African people with different sexual identities."