

ARTSEEN | JUNE 2026

John Armleder: *Ripple: Furniture Sculpture and Painting after 1982*

By Saul Ostrow



John Armleder, *FS 155*, 1987. Acrylic on chairs, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery. Photo: Christopher Stach.

From his Fluxus-related anti-art gestures in the 1960s and '70s to the poured and striped paintings, surrogates, and furniture sculptures of the 1980s and '90s, the Swiss artist John Armleder treats art less as a prescribed category of objects than as a mode of intervention. His use of chance, indifference, and ambient conditions, informed by John Cage's compositional strategies, means his works are intended to function as loosely scored situations. Their "weak politics" concerns the situation an artwork convenes rather than any message it might carry. Within a postmodern frame, each work's subject is the encounter it structures. Placed in a collector's home or an institution, surrounded by other objects, Armleder's ensembles are not received the same way as in the gallery, where they appear in relative isolation alongside others of their ilk.

When first encountered in the ostensibly neutral gallery, these works already anticipate displacement into domestic or institutional interiors, where they will register as disruptions of prevailing norms. This renders the gallery a provisional site—a showroom rather than a destination. By presenting paintings, furniture, and quotidian objects as alternative kinds of events, he refuses its being an impartial backdrop and treats it as a *mise-en-scène* in which the boundary between art and furnishing, contemplation and domestic comfort, is deliberately blurred. Such staging implicates the politics of display, value, and commerce and folds those

institutions into the chain of sites through which art circulates and acquires status. In this way the gallery, the museum, and the domestic interior appear as overlapping, semi-fictional environments keyed to context, framing, and the constructedness of value.



Installation view: *John Armleder: Ripple: Furniture Sculpture and Painting after 1982*, David Kordansky Gallery, New York, 2026. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery. Photo: On White Wall.

Imagine how in a domestic interior, an abstract painting flanked by two identical electric guitars becomes a localized disruption of the logic of taste and status. A vanity that bears a blank gray panel rather than a mirror, or objects that seem the result of a chance encounter, strains the distinction between functional and aesthetic things and tests what will be accepted as appropriate or mismatched. Read as a micro-politics of class, gender, and leisure, such interiors show how a work's presence can either reinforce or quietly unsettle the hierarchies that organize the space. Thus Armleder's politics lie less in what objects mean than in the aesthetic situations they convene.

The poured and striped paintings do not operate as mere surrogates; they function as stand-ins for other paintings of their genre by critically established artists while recalling 1970s modernist projects that sought to "carry painting to its logical—or illogical—conclusion," as artists and critics of the period often claimed. These works are self-consciously derivative: generic paintings that stage the postmodern critique of originality and demonstrate that a fully legible "painting" can be achieved without the usual justificatory claims. In the 1980s, that irony aligned Armleder with postmodernism's signature moves—skepticism toward grand narratives, playful appropriation, and a refusal of stable meaning or singular style.

By reactivating and remixing earlier avant-garde strategies—Dada, Fluxus, modernist abstraction, Pop, minimalism—without treating any as the correct line of progress, Armleder keeps their legacies in play. Set against the object-centered practices of the late 1970s and early '80s—Marcel Duchamp's readymades, Andy Warhol's silkscreens, Sherrie Levine's appropriations, Allan McCollum's serialities, Jeff Koons's kitsch, Haim Steinbach's shelves—he reads less as a late entrant to a cult of thingness than as an artist organized around contingency and surrogacy. In this mapping of postmodern typologies, the past functions as repertory rather than teleology; each historical narrative provides a reserve or resource.



John Armleder, *In the Raw*, 2026. Guitars and acrylic on canvas, overall: 98 ½ x 125 x 6 ½ inches. Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery. Photo: Christopher Stach.

By conflating painting with design, décor, and everyday objects, his ensembles and pour/puddle canvases both adhere to and undermine modernist purity and the romantic myth of the unique, expressive work, treating the art object as a flexible, context-dependent node in a network of aesthetics and commerce. That such practices, which he has revisited across decades to avoid a neat, one-directional evolution, still appear tame in 2026 is neither surprising nor incidental. We inhabit a culture in which “events”—openings, activations, brand experiences, pop-ups—are the shared operational mode of art and commerce, where appropriation is routine, the readymade institutionalized, and surrogacy is embedded in the apparatus of digital reproduction and distribution. Within that regime, Armleder’s ensembles no longer register as the disruptive gestures they once seemed but read instead as lucid rehearsals of the conditions that now structure visual culture at large. Seen beside the spectacle economies and commodity-scale reproductions of figures such as Damien Hirst, the market-driven installations of major biennials, and the relentless circulation of neo-forms through digital platforms and museum merchandising, Armleder’s interventions now feel comparatively subdued yet strangely relevant.

Saul Ostrow is an independent critic, curator, and Art Editor at Large for *BOMB* magazine.
