

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Telegraph

Frieze London review, Regent's Park: the fine art of hobnobbing and showing off

Alistair Sooke

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Gazing Ball by Jeff Koons in David Zwirner Frieze London 2019 CREDIT: REX

Alistair Sooke, CHIEF ART CRITIC

It can be tiring traipsing around the annual Frieze London art fair in Regent's Park – which is why, when you pass Tokyo gallery Taro Nasu's booth, you may find yourself drawn to a black vending machine.

If you're after refreshment, though, prepare for disappointment – because this automated device is an installation by British conceptual artist Ryan Gander, dispensing random artworks, at £500 a pop, instead of fizzy drinks.

Flash your credit card for this high-rolling game of lucky dip, and you could win a tiny "sculpture" embellished with a diamond.

More likely, though, the machine will spit out a black resin cast of a Casio wristwatch wrapped around a rock.

Other "prizes" include, in the words of an attendant, "natural stones" – which I think means, simply, "stones".

Gander had wanted each artwork to cost £1,000. In the run-up to the fair, though, it turned out that the machine's limit was much lower, so he settled on half that sum. A bargain, you might think. Still, when I visited, late on the fair's opening day, only one person had opened their wallet – and their card was rejected.

This is the thing about Frieze: if you're going to buy, you need a generous credit limit.

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On the other side of the park, at Frieze Masters, where dealers hawk art by older, blue-chip names, the last Botticelli in private hands outside Italy, a portrait of a poet at the Medici court, is on sale.

Lord knows what he'd make of Gander's stunt – though his world-weary expression suggests he's seen it all before.



Botticelli's depiction of the Greek-born poet and soldier Michele Marullo Tarnaniota (1453-1500) is being offered for sale by the London dealership Trinity Fine Art at Regents Park Frieze Masters, London CREDIT: REX

The PR machine behind Frieze bills the fairs as a major cultural event. Truthfully, though, they are a luxury marketplace for the one per cent. Yes, there's a lot of fine art on display. There's also a lot of dross.

The real show is provided by all the glamorous fashionistas and celebrities, super-wealthy collectors and slick-haired dealers, sashaying through the fairs' brightly lit tents, hobnobbing and showing off.

This is what the national gallery would look like in a faraway land called Money, as a friend visiting Frieze Masters put it to me. This is also what Gander's vending machine is gently satirising.

A mile away in Mayfair, Grayson Perry is doing something similar, in a new show including pots, trinkets, and a tapestry, called Super Rich Interior Decoration.

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Grayson Perry launches his new exhibition Super Rich Interior Decoration, standing in front of his work titled Large Expensive Abstract Painting 2019, at the Victoria Miro Gallery CREDIT: PA

The tapestry, which looks like a map of London executed by Jackson Pollock, is titled “Large Expensive Abstract Painting” – the default décor for people with deep pockets who want to splurge on modern art.

It’s perfectly amusing, if a little arch, and you swiftly get the point. Yet, Perry – who, despite his cross-dressing persona, is contemporary art’s torchbearer for Middle England – finds himself in a ticklish position vis-à-vis the gallery’s rich collectors: berate them too much, and they’ll stop buying his work.

So, he teases rather than goads, and cites Korean artist Nam June Paik, who is about to be the subject of a retrospective at Tate Modern: “The artist should always bite the hand that feeds him – but not too hard.”

Around the corner, at Hauser & Wirth, large, expensive abstract paintings are very much in vogue. Mark Bradford, the African-American son of an LA hairdresser, is showing nine of them, plus a related video set to civil-rights anthem Dancing in the Street.

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Mark Bradford Gatekeeper 2019, at Hauser & Wirth London CREDIT: © MARK BRADFORD COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH

Densely layered, complex things, with grid-like marks evoking urban plans, and “brushstrokes” surprisingly formed, on closer inspection, from brightly coloured climbing ropes and crumpled balls of pigmented paper, the three paintings on display in the north gallery – one of which, “Cerberus” (2018), is 45ft long – are spectacular.

If figurative painting is more your thing, I recommend London-based South African artist Lisa Brice’s new show at Stephen Friedman Gallery, which follows her solo exhibition at Tate Britain last year.

Brice is known for her “feminist” nudes: assertive, defiant, often smoking female figures, with distinctive ultramarine skin (inspired, in part, by the “Blue Devils” of Trinidadian carnival), who resist coming across as passive sexual objects.

Several appear here: think of them as nudes with attitude. Two new folding dressing screens, decorated by the artist, enhance the sense that we have slipped backstage at a cabaret.

A few blocks away, at Grosvenor Hill, Gagosian is staging a surprisingly playful exhibition of sculptures, rather than the graffiti-like paintings for which he’s better known, by the American artist Cy Twombly (1928-2011).

We’ve seen Twombly’s sculptures before, in his 2008 retrospective at Tate Modern: ghostly, poetic, slender assemblages of found objects, including palm leaves, oars, and doorstops, painted white and sometimes stacked together in tiers, like wedding cakes.

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Cy Twombly's *Untitled*, 2009 at Gagosian London CREDIT: © CY TWOMBLY FOUNDATION, COURTESY GAGOSIAN

Yet, here, we discover fresh aspects to his work in three dimensions, including, alongside high-minded classical allusions, a cheeky, child-like wit – one sculpture has the winning title “*Untitled (Humpty Dumpty)*” (2004).

There are childish colours, too: “*Turkish Delight*” (2000), for instance, is positively garish, with its blobby forms, roughly slathered in plaster, painted cerise and lime-green.

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Elsewhere in Mayfair, Sprüth Magers presents a marvellous retrospective of all eight videos featuring black cut-paper silhouettes by the American artist Kara Walker, whose fantastical, 42ft-high fountain, parodying the Victoria Memorial outside Buckingham Palace, was unveiled earlier this week at Tate Modern. The fountain made a bigger splash, but I much preferred the Sprüth Magers show.

Ironically, then, one of the chief pleasures of "Frieze Week" is to be found not at the fairs themselves, but in doing the rounds of the public and commercial galleries which pull out all the stops while so many important collectors are in town.

Of course, it's impossible to see everything. If you can, though, visit the Serpentine Gallery, where the 65-year-old German artist Albert Oehlen, the self-professed champion of "bad" painting, presents a quirky series of raucous, larger-than-life, borderline-unhinged artworks, spanning almost three decades. Believe me, they're a riot.

Various venues, tickets: frieze.com/fairs