

Stephen Friedman Gallery

City A.M.
Frieze 2021: An electric start to the new art season
Saskia Solomon
22 October 2021

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Image: Courtesy of City A.M.

Frieze is the best of them all to kickstart the new London art season, with its sculpture garden and two imposing marquees – Frieze London and Frieze Masters – containing both well-known and new works, in addition to new digital art, and, of course, NFTs.

You need a map to navigate Frieze. With over 276 booths across both tents, set in a labyrinthine floorplan occasionally interrupted by a cafe, restaurant, or wealth management lounge, one can easily feel overwhelmed.

Add to that a constant hum of purpose; exhibitors pay thousands for the privilege of showing at the Fair, and that's only the booth price. Galleries often bring as many as seven team members with them, and organise parties to network beyond Fair hours, while pop ups proliferate throughout the city. The question, in this moment of change and uncertain economic climate: are fairs worth it?

When Frieze premiered, in 2003, it marked a new era for the art market: one that was globalised, and that could juxtapose new art with the old, drawing swarms of potential buyers and visitors. Originally the stomping ground for the YBAs, the Fair now serves to debut artists through their "Spotlight" and "Stand Out" booths.

For the money, the galleries receive international exposure, in-house vetting, networking opportunities with potential buyers, and, of course, goodie bags. The brainchild of seasoned curators Amanda Sharp and Matthew Slotover, Frieze now also runs Fairs in New York and LA.

As the doors opened on the 13th, there was a palpable relief. Though last year's Frieze saw a rather successful use of digital space with its "Frieze Viewing Room", there's nothing better than in-person contact. Angela Westwater, of Manhattan gallery Sperone Westwater, agrees. "Those of us who have been missing in action for two years have been delighted, not only to see our colleagues but also our collectors – old friends whom we have missed for so long".

For Westwater, it's true that "seeing art in person is very emotionally satisfying and stimulating", and that "while certainly there have been increases in digital sales, there's nothing better than the real thing".

Many galleries exhibited at Basel in Switzerland a month before Frieze but "this is so much bigger. First of all because the crowd is so much bigger. Basel had about 40 per cent of the usual audience due to the travel regulations. There weren't many Americans or even many British people present, for instance".

As an environment, Frieze is mesmerising. It has the feeling of being at a remove from reality, with everything from the carpeting to the booth walls designed with the artworks in mind. The lighting is soft, exhibitors given a choice of swatches to choose from, all variations on the year's muted shades. Outside, the autumnal Regents Park bustled with impressively overdressed people speed-walking the 15 minute jaunt through the park that connects the two marquees. There's also a shuttle, which is in reality a bendy bus, and a fleet of prepaid BMWs, creating occasional traffic jams.

A key difference this year was the need to show proof of vaccination or a negative lateral flow test to gain wristbands for entry. While in previous years passes were issued physically, this time they were all digital, which

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certainly could have been efficient had not greater phone dependency in these Covid times meant that phones died, resulting in a backlog at the VIP desk. Inside the tents, there was a confusion of masked and unmasked people overwhelmed by art and networking opportunities, it seems, at the expense of the rules.

Normally the Gagosians, Zwirners, and Hauser and Wirths of the art world have a monopoly of the Fair's best spaces, with the less internationally known galleries just happy to be along for the ride. But this year, in a time of ever-changing travel restrictions, there was the welcomed sense of internationalism.

The two Friezes – London and Masters – are as different as they are similar. At Masters you can find Hirst cross-sections of sheep, Egon Schiele life studies, Gilbert & George stained glass, and a first-edition Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (£87,000). Regular Masters participants Acquavella Galleries, Colnaghi, Marian Goodman Gallery offered their usual display of tastefully curated works, and recorded strong sales.

Over at Frieze London, meanwhile, the usual big and brash art was on a smaller scale, with the exception of a work by Do Ho Suh at Lehmann Maupin, a fabric replica of a room from his house. Stephen Friedman Gallery drew admiration with Deborah Roberts' large mixed media canvases of school girls made from found images, while the layered acrylic paintings of lips by Gina Beavers caused a small stir, but otherwise nothing terribly scandalous.

Of the big sales, David Zwirner gallery netted \$2.2m for a Kerry Jane Marshall painting to a "major American collection". Meanwhile, Thaddaeus Ropac reported 18 sales on its first day, including the sale of Antony Gormley's 800-pound cast-iron sculpture WATER II (2018) for £400,000, as well as a Georg Baselitz's painting, Zimmer mit Dusche (2021), for €1.2m to a private museum in Berlin.

Next stop for many gallerists is FIAC in Paris; the circuit marches on. The general consensus this year is that Frieze came back in triumph. "It's not two years ago, but it's very positive. I think people have found it very uplifting." Says Westwater.