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London's Frieze Prepares for a Chill



The Story of Babar and Kin

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT | OCTOBER 10, 2008

London's Frieze Prepares for a Chill

Artists, Dealers Fret While Smaller Fairs Bow Out in Wake of Economic Crisis

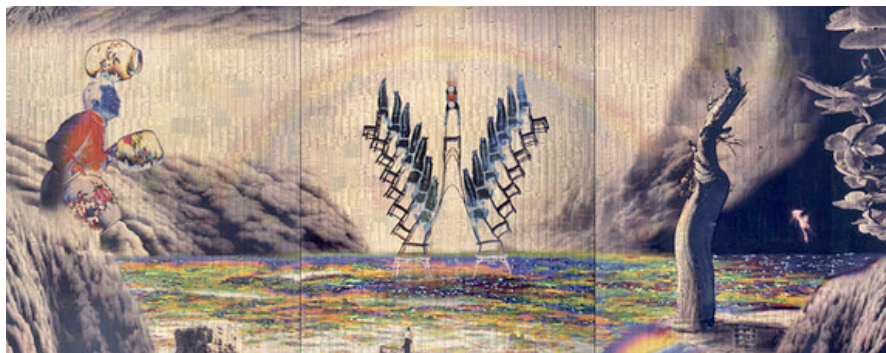
By KELLY CROW

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Gordon Cheung/TFCW

Gordon Cheung's triptych 'Death by a Thousand Cuts' at The Future Can Wait art fair in London.

London's biggest contemporary art show, the Frieze Art Fair, opens next week alongside several smaller satellite fairs with funky names like Kounter Kulture and The Future Can Wait. If only it could.

Amid a worsening global credit crisis, dealers say some art lovers no longer feel safe tucking their money into new art, particularly the kind made by the young and untested. This reversal is already reshaping the look and expectations for Frieze, whose performance typically sets the tone for the fall art season.

At least two satellite fairs, Pulse and Year 08, bowed out of Frieze week, partly because of the scarcity of cheap or available venues, the directors confirmed. Another show, Bridge, is going to Berlin later this month instead, where a fair costs "twenty times less" to produce, according to its director, Michael Workman.

Rachel Lehmann, a New York dealer still exhibiting at the main fair in Regent's Park, says she's fielding worried phone calls from her artists, sometimes as early as 8 a.m. "People are concerned, and they have good reason to be," she says.

A Frieze on Art



Even government entities and nonprofits are getting involved. The Swiss Cultural Fund in Britain, for example, is covering booth fees to make it easier for eight Swiss galleries to participate in the Zoo Art Fair, another satellite show. (The fair is in talks with

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Linda Ny Lind

foundations in Brazil and Japan, who may make similar offers for future fairs, according to Zoo officials.)

Since Frieze was launched in 2003, art-world experts have looked to the fair to help gauge contemporary collectors' buying habits and tastes. The 150-odd galleries that show there

have come to rely on the fair and others like it to generate as much as a third of their annual sales. The world's top-selling artists, meanwhile, have lined up to stuff their work into the fair's warren of booths in a tent in Regent's Park because the fair's one-stop-shopping model appeals to their global clientele. Last year, fair organizers said the week-long show drew 68,000 people.

Amanda Sharp, Frieze's founding co-director, says the main fair is arguably better situated to weather a lean year because it showcases established dealers who "have stuck in there through thick and thin times" and have steady collector bases and extensive museum contacts.

These include Ms. Lehmann of New York's Lehmann Maupin, but even she is hedging against possible weak sales. Last year, Ms. Lehmann's booth included several drawings that typically attract newcomer buyers; this year, she asked her artists, including Ashley Bickerton, to create large-scale works she can shop to museum curators or private art foundations who may need to spend the remainder of their art acquisition budgets by year's end. She's also planning to offer longer payment plans and accept less money upfront, as little as 20%, from well-known buyers. "We're aiming for institutions," she says.

The main fair's other highlights include an installation of British artist Eduardo Paolozzi's kaleidoscopic screenprints and sculptures from the 1960s, on view at the booth of Gavin Brown's Enterprise. The pieces were chosen by Swiss art star Urs Fischer.

Istanbul's PiST gallery is likely to draw crowds because it is recreating one of Turkey's ubiquitous tea shops in its booth, a nod to Didem Özbek, one of the artists selling there. Ms. Özbek is showing a series of work that includes white sugar cubes with printed wrappers that give details about her fellow Frieze artists -- a sly reference to the role that Turkey's tea shops play in spreading local news and gossip. (Yoko Ono will also champion performance-based art in a talk at the fair at 5 p.m. Friday.)

Frieze doesn't disclose total sales. But producing a fair of this magnitude has never been cheap: Galleries must earn from \$8,700 to \$50,000 simply to cover their booth rentals, and several lay out considerably more because they hire architects to design their spaces. Smaller booths at the Scope art fair, also held in London during Frieze, can cost as much as \$25,000.

Dealers say Frieze's shoppers were already surprisingly measured last year. The fear this year is that more European collectors will be content to browse and that Americans -- arguably the biggest drivers of the contemporary art boom -- may not show at all. Carlo Bronzini, a collector and investment banker in New York, went to Frieze last year but isn't going this time. "A lot of people just aren't in the mood to spend," he says.

Year 08 intended to present work by 46 galleries during Frieze but canceled in part because of the "play-it-safe climate," says Susannah Haworth, one of the fair's organizers. "Even if it is a flawless, seamless endeavor, there are outside factors that can't be controlled and can make or break an event," Ms. Haworth adds. "This year, economic factors seem to predominate."

Desperate times have also compelled the younger fairs to try creative measures. Kounter Culture, which is making its debut this year in a converted brewery in East London, is enlisting artists to man booths of their own work and help sell the work throughout fair week, not just on opening night. Nearby, The Future Can Wait is getting rid of booths altogether. Instead, the walls of its 22,000-square-foot space are being lined with canvases. "You'll be able to breathe," promises director Zavier Ellis.

For Scope, a four-year veteran of Frieze, survival may come down to location. After struggling to pull in crowds to its East London space last year, Scope director Alexis Hubshman signed a five-year deal to rent space in the Lord's Cricket Ground, much closer to Frieze's tent in West London. Mr. Hubshman says his 50 participating galleries are thrilled with the new spot and

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none have backed out as a result of the move, much to his relief. "I don't have a money tree in my backyard," he says.

Major London collector Anita Zabłudowicz says the financial crisis has spurred her to "be even more attentive" to her favorite young artists and galleries next week. Her calendar, therefore, is packed: Monday, she's expected to attend a dinner for artist Michael Landy; the next night she's dining with artist Toby Ziegler; by Thursday, she needs to see the main fair but also attend a preview for Zoo and be ready to host breakfast on Friday at her own nonprofit project space, 176.

Highlights among the satellite fairs include Cedric Christie's smashed-up "race car" made of paper and racing stickers, at Scope. Over at The Future Can Wait, Monica Ursina Jäger has planted her sculpture of a black glossy tree whose willow-like branches morph into metal crutches. At Zoo, fair workers will whistle "The Internationale," the socialist workers' anthem, while they work, part of a performance piece orchestrated by Nina Beier. Another artist at Zoo, Reza Aramesh, has "bribed the security guards with chocolates" so that they'll agree to wear his art -- generic camouflage uniforms, says Zoo director Soraya Rodriguez.

The major auction houses will also try to sell a combined \$237 million worth of contemporary art during a round of sales set for next weekend. On Oct. 17, Sotheby's anchors its two-day sale with a group of 10 "Skull" paintings by Andy Warhol estimated to sell for between \$8.7 million and \$12.2 million. Phillips de Pury's sale follows on Oct. 18 and includes a 23-foot-tall sculpture by Takashi Murakami, "Tongari-kun," priced at between \$6.1 million and \$7.8 million. On Oct. 19, Christie's sale includes Francis Bacon's honey-colored "Portrait of Henrietta Moraes," estimated to sell for between \$9.6 million and \$13 million.

Ms. Rodriguez says she's starting to feel strangely sanguine about the fate of fair week: "Maybe we'll just go back to drinking in pubs and discussing Duchamp, which wouldn't be bad."

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