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Frieze London Projects Robust Business Amid Economic, Political Turmoil

Carl Freedman Gallery's artist Lindsey Mendick at Frieze London 2023. LINDA NYLIND

LONDON — The VIP preview at Frieze London, the fine art fair in Regent's Park, is usually a magnet for actors, musicians, politicians and creatives. But this year, for the fair's 20th anniversary, it was the aesthetes who were out in force.

On Wednesday, Roksanda Ilinčić, Russell Tovey, Ozwald Boateng, Wolfgang Tillmans, Tom Rasmussen and Pierpaolo Piccioli were among guests who wandered from booth to booth, carrying bags by Hermès, Chanel or other luxury brands and gazing at the art.

The fair also took itself more seriously: there were fewer mirrors for selfie opportunities, and no gimmicky artworks made for Instagram moments.

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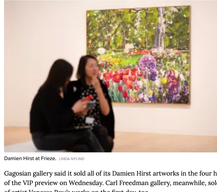
There was only one mirror that deserved real attention: Theo Mercier's "Mirror Error," which fused images of ancient Greek sculptures with a small mirror window. The work invited people to look at themselves and to reflect on the past and present, just as Frieze has been doing for its anniversary year, which has so far been a success.

Despite ongoing economic and political upheaval worldwide, visitors are still buying, collecting and supporting the arts.

"With the tension and state of the world, I have to say I'm a little bit relieved at how much we were able to sell today," said Davida Nemeroff, owner of the Night Gallery in Los Angeles.

The fair was only just beginning and Nemeroff had already sold pieces by her U.K.-based artists Reza Aramesh, Clare Woods and Tahnee Lonsdale, with prices ranging between 10,000 and 80,000 pounds.



Damien Hirst at Frieze. LINDA NYLIND

Gagosian gallery said it sold all of its Damien Hirst artworks in the four hours of the VIP preview on Wednesday. Carl Freedman gallery, meanwhile, sold all of artist Vanessa Raw's works on the first day, too.

London is the second-biggest art market in the world, larger than the entire west of Europe combined, and it's a title it is determined to retain.

Chief executive officer of Frieze Simon Fox said the fair has been working with the mayor's office to make sure that London, and the U.K., retain their preeminence "as the cultural capital of Europe," he said.

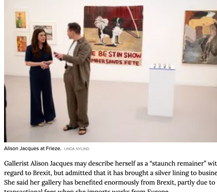
The mayor's office has also launched a campaign called London Creates to celebrate the galleries and artists in the British capital.

"Culture is in the DNA of London. It's the reason that four out of five people tell us they come here. One in every six jobs is a creative one, and it's worth nearly 60 billion pounds to our economy," said Justine Simons, deputy mayor for culture and the creative industries.

To ensure that artists stay in London rather than relocate to less-expensive places, the mayor's office has established 12 creative enterprise zones which offer affordable studio and living spaces. Simons said her office is on track to deliver 764,000 square feet of affordable studio space, which comes with local business tax support, training and advice.

In London, artists studios have been disappearing due to gentrification, but Simons believes "we're gaining more than we've lost. We're in a net benefit."

The London mayor's office has also been working to counteract the impact of Brexit, which has made trade with Europe more complex. "Brexit hasn't been good news for culture. The European Union is our biggest market in the creative economy," she said.



Alison Jacques at Frieze. LINDA NYLIND

Gallerist Alison Jacques may describe herself as a "staunch remainer" with regard to Brexit, but admitted that it has brought a silver lining to business. She said her gallery has benefited enormously from Brexit, partly due to the transactional fees when she imports works from Europe.

"When we were part of the European Union, you'd bring work [into the U.K.] and there would be a 20 percent-plus tax to pay. Now, if a work is coming from Europe, you import it in a different way. It's a 5 percent tax — that's a big [benefit] for U.K.-based clients. There is an upside, even if I'm loath to admit it," she said.

Her gallery, which opened this month on Cork Street in Mayfair, sold a painting by the late Swedish-born, British-based painter Monica Sjöö for 100,000 pounds within the first four hours of the fair's opening.

Jacques' gallery has been a driving force in establishing the reputations of previously unknown female artists. There are many of them, Jacques said.

She pointed to artists including Hannah Wilke, who in the '70s and '80s was battling against male-dominated minimalism in New York. She also talked about Veronica Ryan, who is in her late 60s, and who won the Turner Prize last year.

"As a woman of color, she was battling against major prejudice at that time, and it's only now that she's getting recognition," said Jacques, who sells predominantly to museums and museum-level collectors.

Sophie von Hellermann at Frieze. LINDA NYLIND

Similarly, gallerist Pilar Corrias represents more female than male artists. "I represent about 30 percent male artists, but many galleries around the world represent 30 percent female artists. I've flipped it and everybody's talking about it, but why shouldn't we be talking about it?" she said.

Her booth at Frieze was dedicated to the artist Sophie von Hellermann's colorful and joyous take on the amusement park Dreamland in Margate, Kent.

There was a growing buzz about art coming out of Margate, home of Turner Contemporary and an array of art galleries. Tracey Emin, a Margate native, has been transforming a vast, derelict space on the waterfront into artists' studios.

Carl Freedman, a Margate-based gallery representing the artist Lindsey Mendick, was selling its artwork quickly within the first hour of opening at the fair. For the fair, Mendick produced seven ceramic handbags with shipwrecks coming out of them. They were presented on a glossy plinth and meant to be a twisted joke on the commoditization of art. The pieces range in price from 11,500 to 13,000 pounds.

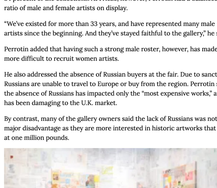
At Emmanuel Perrotin's gallery Perrotin, female artists represent more than 34 percent of the collections. At Frieze, however, Perrotin had a balanced ratio of male and female artists on display.

"We've existed for more than 33 years, and have represented many male artists since the beginning. And they've stayed faithful to the gallery," he said.

Perrotin added that having such a strong male roster, however, has made it more difficult to recruit women artists.

He also addressed the absence of Russian buyers at the fair. Due to sanctions, Russians are unable to travel to Europe or buy from the region. Perrotin said the absence of Russians has impacted only the "most expensive works," and has been damaging to the U.K. market.

By contrast, many of the gallery owners said the lack of Russians was not a major disadvantage as they are more interested in historic artworks that start at one million pounds.



Frieze London 2023. LINDA NYLIND

Katrina Aleksa Ryemill, an art adviser and cofounder of Association of Women in The Arts, praised this year's fair for its diversity across genders and genres.

"Women are buying good art, not just because it's made by a man or woman. More and more women are empowered to become collectors," she said.

Grace Schofield, a director at Union Pacific gallery, said of the eight artists in the booth, guests have been asking about the four women: Koak; Nova Jiang; Jin Han Lee, and Ulala Imai.

When Kate MacGarry opened her eponymous gallery in East London 21 years ago, she was asked if she had any women collectors. "I said, 'ask me the other way around, do I have any male collectors?' I predominantly sell to women from all walks of life," she said.

This year's fair overall was diverse in terms of artists.

Kk Obi, founder of the publication Boy.Brother.Friend, said the "art world is embracing a lot of Black artists and giving them space, it's doing a lot more than the fashion industry."

"The art industry is really putting its money where its mouth is when it comes to Black artists and representation," he added.

South Asian art made ripples in the week leading up to Frieze.

Anita Chhiba, founder of Diet Paratha, the Instagram account that celebrates South Asian identity, teamed with Boss to host a one-off exhibition showcasing the work of 13 artists from the diaspora at the brand's flagship on Regent Street.

At the fair, Priyanka Raja, cofounder of Experimenter gallery in India's Kolkata and Mumbai, made it a point to display art from eight female South Asian artists, including Afrah Shafiq, Ayesha Sultana, Bani Abidi, Biraaj Dodiya, Bhasha Chakrabarti, Radhika Khimji, Reba Hore and Sakshi Gupta.