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Art Fairs

'It Does Feel a Touch Safe': Frieze New York Has Plenty of Pleasures and Solid Sales, but Risky Works Are Hard to Find

On the whole, dealers have brought art that offers a respite from our turbulent world.

Julia Halperin, May 2, 2019



Yayoi Kusama's Narcissus Garden (1966-) and Chris Ofili's painting, to take and to give (2012) at Victoria Miro at Frieze New York 2019. Photo by Pac Pobric.

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The entrance to Frieze New York this year is a selfie-taker's dream: an enchanting installation of steel spheres by [Yayoi Kusama](#), with an aisle just wide enough to pose in, spills out across the floor in front of a billboard-size painting by [Chris Ofili](#) of women in a languorous pile at the foot of a mountain.

This display, at Victoria Miro's booth, was a fitting start for a fair that was heavy on crowd-pleasing sculpture, stylish painting, and art to get lost in, while comparatively light on confrontationally political, explicitly sexual, or "difficult" new-media work. (Perhaps the most recognizable political figure at the fair appeared not on the walls, but in the aisles, where former New York City mayor and regular Frieze visitor Michael Bloomberg was spotted chatting with Metropolitan Museum of Art director Max Hollein.)



Mendes Wood DM at Frieze New York 2019. Photo by Mark Blower. Courtesy: Mark Blower/Frieze.

The fair’s special programs, including focuses on outsider art and Latinx art —assembled by a high-profile cast of museum directors including [Franklin Sirmans](#), [Brett Littman](#), and [Laura Hoptman](#)—offered ample opportunities for discovery. But the main gallery sections were, by and large, more conventional efforts.

“It does feel a touch safe,” said Chris Dorland, an artist and co-founder of the New York gallery [Magenta Plains](#). By the end of the VIP preview on Wednesday, his gallery had sold two new paintings by Ebecho Muslimova of her alter ego, Fatebe, for \$12,000. “The risk of doing an art fair is significant and people are being strategic about how to make it worth their while financially,” he noted.

Solid Start

The strategy seems to have paid off. Many galleries said they did solid business during the VIP preview at prices ranging from \$5,500 (for a craggy ceramic cylinder by Tony Marsh at [Koenig & Clinton](#)) to \$500,000 (for the 1960 [Max Ernst](#) sculpture *Dans les rues d’Athenes Huismes* at Paul [Kasmin](#)).

To be sure, it was far from an across-the-board feeding frenzy, but in today’s circumspect market, few fairs are. Although collectors clamor for the same small handful of emerging names, they are otherwise more likely to reserve a gem in advance or sleep on a sale rather than impulse buy within the first hour, which was not uncommon even five years ago.



Louis Fratino at Sikkema Jenkins at Frieze New York 2019. Photo: Julia Halperin.

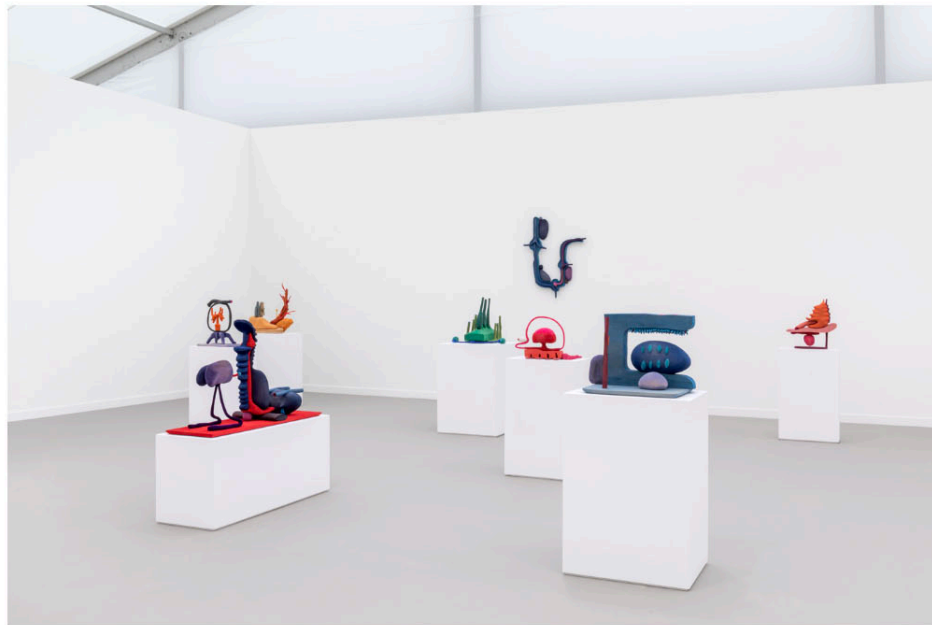
Among the anointed few in extremely high demand was 25-year-old wunderkind Louis Fratino, whose two intimate, richly colored portraits of himself and his family sold at Sikkema Jenkins for \$9,000 and \$45,000, respectively. More work by Fratino is also on view in his inaugural exhibition at the gallery's Chelsea location, which nearly sold out not long after the invitations landed in collectors' inboxes, according to the gallery's Scott Briscoe.

“We are having a ‘Calgon, take me away!’ moment,” said the art advisor Liz Parks. “Perhaps we are searching for artwork that is quietly contemplative, or visually intriguing, or that takes us to an alternate reality—anything to get away from the anxiety of daily life in 2019 with our frazzled political climate, the daily shootings, the burning of a sacred church.”

Old Media

This return to old-fashioned art was also evident in the critical mass of work that put a contemporary twist on traditional forms, from bronze to ceramic to textiles. Among the early sales were new, largely tabletop-size sculptures by Thomas Houseago at Xavier Hufkens, around half of which had sold by Wednesday afternoon at prices between \$40,000 and \$200,000. (As a bonus for the control freaks among us, a handful were rendered in plaster so the buyer could select the bronze finish of his or her choice before the final work is cast.)

Meanwhile, the Brooklyn Museum acquired a tapestry by Diedrick Brackens from Various Small Fires, while Koenig & Clinton sold 11 of 13 ceramics by California-based artist Tony Marsh for prices ranging from \$5,500 to \$7,500. And while much of the work in the main section was not explicitly engaged in politics, Jenny Holzer created a new series of redaction paintings on linen, many of which were based on the Mueller Report and nearly all of which sold at prices ranging from \$175,000 to \$300,000 at Hauser & Wirth.



Matthew Ronay at Casey Kaplan’s Frieze New York stand. Photo: courtesy of the gallery.

Casey Kaplan sold nearly half of its tantalizingly strange, anthropomorphic bass wood sculptures by Matthew Ronay, priced between \$28,000 and \$50,000. And [Tina Kim Gallery](#) sold Seoul-based artist Suki Seokyeong Kang's geometric composition of steel, leather, and thread stretched across a wooden frame for around \$10,000. She will be included in the central exhibition at the Venice Biennale this month.

New Establishment

But while the materials or forms may be traditional, that doesn't mean the works were predictable. There was nary a [Barbara Kruger](#) word painting or an [Anish Kapoor](#) mirrored disc—the hallmarks of a blue-chip, international art fair—in sight.

"I'm astonished by how quickly the art world moves today," said [James Fuentes](#), who returned to Frieze after sitting out last year. On VIP day, he sold the majority of a wall full of wire sculptures by artist and musician Lonnie Holley for prices between \$8,000 and \$15,000. "It used to be that every five years you'd see big shifts. But what is here is phenomenally different from what was shown two years ago."



Works by Lonnie Holley at James Fuentes's stand at Frieze New York 2019. Photo: Julia Halperin.

Case in point: one of the highest-priced works at the fair is by an artist who was largely unknown to American audiences just a couple years ago—Argentine Surrealist Leonor Fini, the subject of a recent retrospective at the Museum of Sex, whose 1939 showstopper at Leila Heller was listed at \$1 million.

Part of the fair's shift away from straight-ahead blue-chip and toward the emerging and the overlooked is inevitably due to the ascent of the New York branch of the European Fine Art Fair, which opens to VIPs today. The tony, orchid-filled fair, now in its third year, has lured a number of longtime Frieze exhibitors away from the tent, including Skarstedt, Almine Rech, and Pace.

In all, around 30 galleries that participated in Frieze in 2018—including Gavin Brown's Enterprise, Marian Goodman, Esther Schipper, and Blum & Poe—did not return for this year's edition. But that made room for some new first-timers, particularly from Asia, including Seoul's PKM Gallery and Hong Kong's Edouard Malingue Gallery.

Fair Weather

Many who remained, or attended the fair for the first time, were anxiously awaiting the weather report for a week that has seemingly been cursed by the gods. Last year's fair was marred by a heat wave that made the inside of the tent hotter and stickier than the Times Square subway platform in August. The year before that, torrential downpours threatened to flood the whole fair.

But dealers said Frieze organizers went above and beyond to ensure smooth sailing this time around in ways large and small, from hiring an engineering firm to steer the air conditioning installation, to sending a car to pick up a pair of collectors who would otherwise have found it difficult to get to Randall's Island. (And if Frieze engaged in some kind of sorcery to ward off the drizzle until the final minutes of the VIP preview, it worked.)



Frieze New York 2019. Photo by Mark Blower. Courtesy: Mark Blower/Frieze.

The mild weather seemed to suit an event that offered plenty to enjoy and discover—and less to politically motivate or make one uncomfortable.

“Isn’t this a refuge from all that? Aren’t we supposed to be the antidote?” asked the dealer Sean Kelly. He sold, among other works, a calming blue Callum Innes painting for \$150,000, multiple sculptures by Jose Dávila for \$85,000, as well as a larger sculpture by Dávila on view at Rockefeller Center as part of Frieze’s sculpture display for \$140,000.

“Just make good work and people will respond,” Kelly said. “They voted with their checkbooks.”