

As Frieze London Matures, Choices Push Boundaries

By Ted Loos

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Frieze London holds its 15th edition this year, gathering some 160 galleries in a custom-designed white structure in Regent's Park from Oct. 5 to 8, offering a groaning board of contemporary art in almost every conceivable medium.

For an art fair, it has reached an age of maturity, spawning two offspring: Frieze Masters — held at the other end of Regent's Park on the same dates — is for art made before 2000 and is in its sixth edition with some 130 galleries; and Frieze New York, an American sibling held in May on Randalls Island in New York City.

In tone and style, they harken back to their unusual origins. “Frieze began as a magazine,” said Victoria Siddall, the director of Frieze Fairs, of the still-published art guide. “We were founded in the early '90s in London to tell people about what was exciting in contemporary art and what was going to be interesting in the future.”

The organizers have tried to impart a thoughtful and envelope-pushing feel that springs from that inception. “The idea is to make the fairs places for discussion and debate about art, as well as buying and selling art,” Ms. Siddall said. “And, we've created a slightly different atmosphere, I think.”

That goal has attracted new blood to Frieze London this year — first-time exhibitors include galleries from Lima, Peru; Bogotá, Colombia; Cape Town and Cairo — and it is reflected in the way the fair is organized.

As is typical, there is a section for the heavy-hitter galleries from around the globe, including Marian Goodman, Metro Pictures and Michael Werner, and also a subsidized section for newer galleries. Focus, for galleries less than 12 years old, may present collectors with some fresh faces among dealers, including Carlos/Ishikawa, Instituto de Visión and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler.



“Bouche-Évier” (“Sink Stopper”) by Marcel Duchamp will be shown at the Hauser & Wirth booth. The Estate of Marcel Duchamp licensed by DACS, London. Courtesy of Hauser & Wirth.

But there is also an entire section, new to the fair just for this edition, called “Sex Work: Feminist Art & Radical Politics,” organized by the independent curator Alison M. Gingeras.

The nine presentations, all focusing on one artist, will highlight some of the most boundary-pushing feminist art and “create a market for artists whose work is probably not the easiest to sell,” Ms. Siddall said. For instance, Galerie Andrea Caratsch of St. Moritz will present work by Betty Tompkins, known for her photo-realistic paintings of intercourse.

Ms. Gingeras said that the section evolved out of a book she was writing on the same topic. “A lot of women in my generation were spoiled children of the feminist second wave,” she said. “We took it for granted.”

When Frieze contacted her, Ms. Gingeras said her initial response was, “There’s no way I want to curate something for an art fair,” adding that she had not done such a thing before. “But I thought, I’ll just pitch what I am working on and wait for a ‘no.’”

When the yes came, she attributed it to the commitment on the part of the organizers that “the commercial aspect can’t override the content.”

Somewhat less button-pushing will be the booth of the Los Angeles gallery David Kordansky, showing punchy and graphic paintings and sculptures by Will Boone, including the enamel on bronze sculpture “Prisoner” (2017), depicting hands grasping prison bars.

The first prize for the most high-concept booth may go to Hauser & Wirth, with “Bronze Age c. 3500 BC – AD 2017.” All the works on view will be in bronze, but only half will be for sale; a quarter are loans from museums, and the last quarter are items bought on eBay and elsewhere just for the display.

Jose Dávila's sculpture “Untitled (Pac Man).” Courtesy of the artist

Neil Wenman, a senior director of Hauser & Wirth’s London branch, said the idea was to set the booth in a fictional environment simulating a “regional, underfunded museum.” He added, “We’re looking at it in a lighthearted way.”

He secured the involvement of Mary Beard, an author and Cambridge professor who made the topic of Rome a best seller with the book “S.P.Q.R.,” getting her to record an acoustiguide and videos. There is even a gift shop.

The rationale for going to such lengths was simple. “We all go to so many art fairs,” Mr. Wenman said. “And they tend to bleed into one.” For the practically minded, works by Louise Bourgeois, Jenny Holzer, Paul McCarthy and David Smith will be for sale.

A few galleries will be addressing urbanism and the built environment, among them OMR of Mexico City, making its first appearance in the fair. “We’ve been on the waiting list for a couple of years,” said Cristobal Riestra, a partner in Galería OMR. “Competition is fiercer than ever.”

OMR's booth will hold 16 works, including Jose Dávila's sculpture "Untitled (Pac Man)" and Pia Camil's sculpture "Telluride Interior," both from 2016. "I think there is something urban in all of them — something that addresses the relationship between nature and the man-made," Mr. Riestra said.

Visitors to Frieze London who are ready to look at art from previous decades and centuries can stroll through Regent's Park (perhaps taking the long way through Queen Mary's Gardens) to get to Frieze Masters, next to the London Zoo.

Luxembourg & Dayan will show a booth packed full of the playful and strange works by the late Italian artist Enrico Baj, who made, among other works, paintings of furniture partly out of pieces of furniture, creating his own kind of collage. The works on view will include "Montagna" (1958).

Romare Bearden's "Gray Interior" (1969) mixed media collage will be shown by the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery of New York. All rights reserved Romare Bearden Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

Just because the art at Frieze Masters is older does not mean that the visitors are. "This fair is totally different than the Continental fairs — it's a younger crowd of people," said Ulrich Fiedler, whose Berlin gallery specializes in avant-garde design from the early 20th century. He will show 30 pieces from the Bauhaus that he intends to place with buyers from major museums.

Galerie Ulrich Fiedler first showed at Frieze Masters last year. "I was surprised at the level of interest," Mr. Fiedler said of his presentation of the De Stijl movement. "I didn't have one break."

The interest among younger visitors fits with the organizers' conception of the event. "There are other fairs showing historical art," Ms. Siddall said, referring to the European Fine Art Fair, La Biennale Paris and other shows. "But there was a feeling that we could do it differently, and give it a much more contemporary feel and context."

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery of New York will devote its booth to black artists from the United States to coincide with "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power," on view until Oct. 22 at London's Tate Modern. Two mixed-media collages will be among the works on view: Romare Bearden's "Gray Interior" (1969) and Betye Saar's "Dr. Damballa Ju Ju" (1989).

"African-American art has always been part of our program," Mr. Rosenfeld said. "We have always wanted to expand the canon of art. I have always just shown artists I loved, and the world has woken up."

As for the Frieze Masters context, Mr. Rosenfeld echoed many art world insiders. “It’s a love-hate relationship I have with fairs,” he said. “But they have become an important part of our program, and we put as much energy into them as we do to shows in our gallery.”

The Tate Modern tie-in is part of that effort. “It’s a costly endeavor, to tie to a museum show like this,” he said. “But we have to sell art. We have to walk that fine line.”