

Frieze Art Fair 2012: busier and buzzier than ever before

Ten years since its beginning, the Frieze Art Fair is still bringing all the glamour of the art world to the capital, writes Florence Waters.



Arthur Kennedy 2012: A work by Caragh Thuring, who had a piece purchased by the Tate at Frieze Art Fair Photo: Tate Photography. Courtesy of Thomas Dane Gallery, London

By Florence Waters

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Ten years on and Frieze Art Fair, London's international contemporary art bazaar, is just one organ in what is now a city-wide festivity, an excuse for galleries to flaunt their best new art in a heady long weekend that brings collectors, dealers, scholars and all the glamour of the art world to the capital.

One of the most exciting things to observe on VIP day at Frieze, apart from the intoxicatingly light-handed exchange of cash and Tatinger, is the pace of the changing mood. One always notices the changes, and this year there are many. In typical austerity-defying fashion one New York gallerist told me yesterday that the first day this year was “busier and buzzier” than she had ever seen it, another told me that there was quite a different crowd than normal - and an unusual number of new collectors.

The biggest change is in the presentation of the wares themselves. On the whole, galleries have

opted for restrained curation and honestly crafted pieces over big statements. Bombast is out, and art on a domestic, thoughtful scale is in. Precious Objets d'Arts with a contemporary twist were the order of the day; Matthias Merkel Hess' glazed porcelain oil cans ('Bucketry', 2011-12) were selling like hot cakes at ACME; the French artist Jean Luc Moulène's vase-sized gorgeous ornamentally entwined glass sculpture that requires three highly-skilled glassblowers in a costly high-risk process, was barely visible for the mob at the Thomas Dane Gallery. There was plenty of tapestry, crochet, gold, jewelry, a painting simply called 'Baskets', 2012, by Sigrid Holm Wood, painted in natural dyes all naturally sourced by the artist in Chinese healing plants.

Perhaps this conservative shift is in part due to the advent of the first Frieze Masters, which takes place across Regents' Park this week (Ed Miliband has been among high profile guests), and the rising popularity of rival design fair, the Pavilion of Art and Design. This week sees the opening of more heavyweight satellite events than ever too, among them a major exhibition of new works by the master of refashioned formalism Anish Kapoor, at Lisson Gallery, and the crowd-pleasing "outsider" art wagon Museum of Everything which has landed at Frieze Masters.

But shifting interests reflect the times too. Last year, one of the artworks getting the most attention was a private "superyacht" (it cost €65m to buy as boat, and €75m to buy as an artwork, authenticated by the German artist Christian Jankowski). This year, in the same spot was erected one of the more memorable of this year's "Frieze Projects", experimental audience-participatory artworks designed to punctuate and enliven the monotony of the aisles. The Chinese artist collective, the Yangjiang Group, have teamed up with Cambrian organization Grizedale Arts to erect 'Coliseum of the Consumed', a plywood scaffold for food stalls and performances, which operates on the simple basis that "art should be useful". I spoke to one of the stall owners who was selling juniper juice in plastic baggies and had raised £40 for Youth Group UK doing so.

For all the superficial changes, a decade after it first opened remarkably little has changed at Frieze, given how much has changed outside the marquee walls. Why, for instance, has it taken ten years for the first African art gallery to land at London's international art fair?

Stevenson Gallery from Cape Town and Johannesburg had many reasons to celebrate yesterday. Not only were they a welcome addition to the contemporary art market bazaar, but the Tate had chosen to buy one of their works too. 'Balindile I' by young rising South African star Nicholas Hlobo is a long phallic hosepipe sculpted out of inner tubes which grow into a rubbery plant slumping like an undignified dead animal and sewn together with ribbon. It was among four new acquisitions the Tate made at Frieze yesterday, including a wonderful

Seventies canvas by the underrated American painter Jack Whitten who was making sweeping cloth abstracts long before Gerhard Richter.

In terms of new artists, it's always interesting to see who has been put out by dealers – and who is selling. Thomas Dane had almost completely sold a whole wall of nine works by British painter Caragh Thuring, one of them to Tate. Reminiscent of Hockney's early stuff, she interprets environments such as a New York subway station by isolating symbols and patterns in architecture and arranging their forms onto linen in a simplified and flat manner that play tricks with our memory of a place. Overall, a Frieze year to enjoy.

Frieze Art Fair runs until Sunday in Regents Park

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