

CATNIP FOR COLLECTORS BIG-VALUE SALES ARE THE FRUIT OF CAREFUL BEHIND-THE-SCENES PREPARATION

by Melanie Gerlis



'Frankenstein' (2017) by Will Boone

Champagne is flowing, parties are aplenty and an international art crowd is in town. But despite the appearance of hard and fast sales from London's Frieze art fairs, dealers are working more than ever to make these happen, while much of the art on offer reflects more serious times.

Visitors have certainly filled the two temporary tents so far (the fairs run through the weekend) with around 13,000 people at the VIP openings, a six per cent increase on last year, according to organisers. Collectors including Frank Cohen and Dasha Zhukova mingled with artists, museum directors and minor celebrities from 11am on Wednesday. For the relentlessly roaming art crowd, London's Regent's Park was the place to be.

Big-ticket sales were reported almost immediately, from both Frieze London, for newer art, and Frieze Masters, for older pieces. David Zwirner reported selling out his Frieze London booth within the first few hours of the fair, including Jeff Koons's "Gazing Ball (Giotto The Kiss of Judas)" (2015-16) for \$2.75m, while Thaddaeus Ropac sold Robert Rauschenberg's "Orange Squeeze (Urban Bourbon)" (1992) for \$1.5m. Ancient pieces, including an ivory sculpture of a female figure dated between 500BC and 200AD sold for \$1.2m from Donald Ellis. Lower priced works by 30-something, on-trend artists also sold well: Cohen's purchases included Will Boone's "Frankenstein" (2017) from David Kordansky (\$55,000) and a 2017 work by Harold Ancart (Clearing, \$25,000); Kate MacGarry's solo booth of works by Patricia Treib sold out (£17,500 each). Even the struggling middle market seems fine this week: Lehman Maupin reported several sales of works by Korean artist Lee Bul in the \$125,000-\$175,000 range.

There's some smoke and mirrors however; such transactions don't happen as quickly as it seems. As art buyers become more selective — and more sensitive to the uncertain political and economic environment outside the tents — considerable effort goes into preparing booths and related documentation while clients are emailed details of works on display well ahead of time. "We spent the whole summer putting something together for five days," says Emma Ward, managing director at Dickinson gallery. Her booth shows around 50 European Expressionist works, hung with ropes in the manner of a 1911 "Der Blaue Reiter" exhibition, and accompanied by a 50-page catalogue. Their work paid off: sales to date include Alexej von Jawlensky's "Still life with pitcher" (c.1913), priced at £2.5m.

Such dedication is particularly evident at Frieze Masters. "This is a fair for people to think about what they're not used to thinking about," says Marc Glimcher, president of Pace gallery, who has brought a solo booth dedicated to New Yorker cartoonist Saul Steinberg, half of which had sold by Friday (between \$40,000 and \$60,000). Dealers in older art, who have sometimes struggled to stand out from the dominant 20th-century booths since this fair was launched in 2012, seem to have benefited from the more thoughtful crowd too. Dutch Old Masters specialist Johnny van Haeften said he was thrilled to have sold three works early on, including "The Card Players" by Gerard Terboch (1617-1681) for around £2.5m.

Such seriousness extends to Frieze London, which has an increased historical bent this year. Older female artists who have been overshadowed by their male counterparts continue to be championed — although there is also an overlooked male at Alison Jacques where works by Roy Oxlade, less known in art circles than his widow Rose Wylie, were selling well, including his "Paint tins" oil (£30,000).

Even the invited projects, which in previous years have included a hill for visitors to roll down (by Paola Pivi for Frieze's launch in 2003) and a car adorned with a scantily-clad-model (Richard Prince, 2007), now have more political, social and ecological leanings. Before visitors even enter the fair this year, South African performance artist Donna Kukama invites them to exchange empathy in a mini medicinal garden.

Some fun may have gone out of the fairs, but there is something cheerfully anachronistic about them too. Anyone who thinks the art trade will migrate online may revise their opinion on the back of the crowds in London this week, and at the many other art fairs around the world. "It's in times of uncertainty that people need a real community," says Frieze co-founder Amanda Sharp.