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Hyperreality and the Market

Dispatch from Frieze Los Angeles



Trulee Hall, Frieze Projects, Frieze Los Angeles 2019.
Photo by Mark Blower. Courtesy of Mark Blower/Frieze.

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It was a stroke of genius to stage an art fair on a movie set, a knowing wink at the fake reality of the whole thing. Wandering through streets that looked like New York (if New York had clean, wide streets) in the kind of wet weather Londoners know well, it was hard to hold onto the idea that this was in fact California.

This slightly unnerving sense of hyperreality raised the distinct possibility that the art world, and perhaps current Western civilization, might well be a simulation created by hopped-up screenwriters. If you can accept that Disneyland is presented to us as an imaginary place so that we believe in the reality of the rest of America, as French theorist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard put it, then you may as well accept that art fairs are there to help us believe that such a thing as a global art world exists, too.

Homegrown feel

But, while the top segment of the market has become better globally integrated, [the myth of a unified market](#) belies the more fragmented truth that art scenes are still predominantly local. And that’s no bad thing: in fact, it’s why Frieze LA worked. While Frieze is a British brand by birth, this event felt specific to Los Angeles, largely because it was run by the Angeleno Bettina Korek, the artists’ projects were conceived by the LA curator Ali Subotnick, who focused on LA artists, a third of galleries inside the tent—and much of the art on show throughout—were locally produced.

There were other cultural offerings during the week that were time-and-place specific, such as the fantastic [exhibition](#) of Japanese art from the 1980s and 1990s at Blum & Poe (Parergon: Japanese Art of the 1980s and 1990s, 14 February— 23 March, 2019), which won’t be seen elsewhere. Meanwhile, *In Other Words* [organized a panel](#) in partnership with Frieze focusing on the ways in which Californian museum leaders are perhaps more nimble than their older East Coast and European counterparts in thinking about diversity ([tune into the podcast](#) “Expanding the Canon”, with Michael Govan, CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director of LACMA; Naima Keith, Deputy Director of the California African American Museum and co-artistic director of Prospect.5; Andrew Perchuk, Deputy Director of the Getty Research Institute; and Megan Steinman, Director of The Underground Museum).



Parergon: Japanese Art of the 1980s and 1990s. Installation view, 2019. Blum & Poe, Los Angeles. Courtesy of the artists and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo. Photo: Heather Rasmussen

Back to business

Since this is an art market report, you might well want to know how business went. It was good. Dealers sold well; the work they brought looked strong, overall, and the size of the fair was appealingly manageable. As the saying goes, good things sold well.

There were some interesting works on show including a room-sized Mike Kelley installation at [Hauser & Wirth](#), *Unisex Love Nest* (1999), a sweetly sinister work that sold to a European foundation for \$1.8m. [David Zwirner](#) had an unusual and appealing small, new painting by Kerry James Marshall, a cartoonish head that looked like it was painted using a children’s scratch-art book. Entitled *Black Boy* (2018), it was priced at \$1.5m.

[Blum & Poe](#) sold everything on its stand, which focused solely on LA artists including Friedrich Kunath, Mark Grotjahn, Henry Taylor and Dave Muller, with prices ranging from \$8,000 to \$600,000; “mostly around \$100,000 and under”, Tim Blum said. Many of the sales were of works that could equally well have sold from the gallery or on jpeg, he said, though work by

younger artists “sells well in this kind of context: work that doesn’t necessarily have waiting lists for the globally famished and is in that nice spot of \$40,000 and under”.

Overall, there was something conservative about the offerings: this was a painting-heavy fair with works at affordable prices. Galleries were not taking big risks, focused perhaps on giving a market that feels moderate right now what it wants.

Hollywood fawning

This being Hollywood, it was fun to spot celebrities (though, [given the ownership of the fair](#), one might have expected more stars to turn out). While the art world is typically blasé in the face of fame, there was no pretense of cool around the actor Brad Pitt, who had the good grace to pose for fawning selfies at every turn, as [artNet News amusingly chronicled](#).

Pitt—[himself an artist](#)—was engrossed in conversation about the work of Hugh Steers and the AIDS crisis, and its impact on creative communities, with the New York gallerist [Alexander Gray](#), for whom the fair was a success. “Frieze is consistently good at staging visually beautiful fairs, the scale was totally right-sized and there was steady traffic of good people,” Gray said. “There was something magical about being on a movie set and sales were good; we’re very happy.”



Gabriel Kuri, *Holes and tongues (blushing in three steps)* (2019). Image courtesy of the artist, Esther Schipper, Berlin, and kurimanzutto, Mexico City/New York. Photo by Mark Blower, 2019

Nonetheless, Gray—like most dealers—is actively considering which art fairs to keep and which to drop. “We are all doing too many art fairs and the constant challenge of getting people to the galleries to see the exhibitions we’re making continues to be real.” This sentiment was echoed by many, including Jose Kuri and Monica Manzutto of Mexican gallery [Kurimanzutto](#), whose shared booth with Berlin gallery [Esther Schipper](#) was a highlight—particularly a new work by Gabriel Kuri including *Holes and Tongues (Blushing in Three Steps)*, which had an asking price of €45,000 and sold to the [Hammer Museum](#). “We are so saturated with fairs; you really want them to be something special because otherwise you’re just doing the same things over and over,” Kuri said. “It has to mean something. This fair has great potential. It’s still not *there*, but there is something to be nurtured.”

Time is of the essence

Time is a limited resource and dealers are deliberating about how best to spend theirs. (As the writer Tom Scocca [memorably noted](#), it’s not your biological clock ticking—it’s mortality.) Gallerists are asking themselves how they want to function. “Maybe we are learning to do business differently, because having the time to be with artists and to take care of the collectors and curators who support our program is really important for us,” Manzutto said. “We really need to have the time to think.”

As for Frieze LA, they did the impossible: stage a successful fair in a city that had previously refused to play ball. Should the organization be able to broaden the collecting base and extend the local to encompass more of the West Coast, the future reality looks good.

