

At a Busy Frieze Fair, London's Art Trade Thrives Despite Challenges

Britain's economy may be in turmoil, but the mood during Frieze Week was buoyant, and big colorful paintings were in demand.

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A preview of the Frieze London art fair on Wednesday was packed, with some V.I.P. ticket holders waiting in line for more than an hour. Henry Nicholls/Reuters



By Scott Reyburn

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LONDON — “This is fine. You can’t have too many people,” said David Zwirner, the New York-based gallerist, surrounded by a scrimmage of visitors in his booth at the packed Wednesday preview of [Frieze London](#).

By midafternoon, the gallery confirmed the \$6 million sale of the latest of Kerry James Marshall’s paintings [inspired by John James Audubon’s “Birds of America.”](#) The buyer was an unnamed American museum. Zwirner, whose [London branch](#) is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year, said that all the clients he’d hoped to see had turned up at Frieze, which opened to the public on Thursday and runs through Saturday. “Frieze is a mandatory stop in the art world calendar,” he added. “We’ve seen collectors from China and from India.”



“Black and Part Black Birds in America: (Yellow headed Black bird; Black Chinned Hummingbird; Ruby Throated Hummingbird, male and female)” by Kerry James Marshall, which sold for \$6 million at Frieze. Kerry James Marshall; via David Zwirner, London

Now in its 19th annual edition in its customary tented space in Regent’s Park, Britain’s premier contemporary art fair seemed to demonstrate, by sheer weight of numbers, that London’s contemporary art trade is alive and thriving, despite [Brexit](#), a [domestic economy in turmoil](#), a [new rival fair in Paris](#) and other challenges.

Some V.I.P. ticket holders had to wait in line for more than an hour to attend the Wednesday preview; inside, many regarded conditions as more crowded and less exclusive than in previous years. Frieze declined to release attendance figures for that day.

“I’ve never seen this before. It’s a mess. This is an event, not a fair,” said Alain Servais, a Belgian collector. He said he detected a clear difference of approach between Frieze, now majority-owned by the Los Angeles-based entertainment company [Endeavor](#), and its main rival, Art Basel, pointing to the crowds socializing outside the booths in London, rather than going into them. (Art Basel’s inaugural [Paris+](#) fair opens next week.)

But few exhibitors had any complaints about Frieze London’s more-the-merrier approach. “I’ve never had a fair like this in 15 years,” said Liza Essers, the director of [Goodman Gallery](#), which is based in London and South Africa. The gallery’s sales during the preview included “Freedom,” a new 30-foot hanging made of bottle-top foil by the Ghanaian artist El Anatsui, which it said was priced at \$2.5 million.



Paintings by Jadé Fadojutimi on view at the Gagosian booth at Frieze. Henry Nicholls/Reuters

“There’s a lot of money around for new collections. Decorative painting is a good entry point,” said the New York-based art adviser [Candace Worth](#) who, like many visitors, noted the predominance of big, colorful canvases.

Worth was one of the many professionals who price-checked Gagosian’s booth of seven new 10-foot-wide abstracts by the lauded young British painter Jadé Fadojutimi, whose works are also featured in the main exhibition at this year’s [Venice Biennale](#). Marked at about 500,000 pounds each, or about \$550,000, all seven were sold.

Two years ago during [Frieze Week](#), Fadojutimi’s sumptuously colored abstracts were selling for \$50,000 at the Pippy Houldsworth Gallery in London. Her paintings have been resold at auction for as much as \$1.6 million, underlining the current [speculative heat](#) generated by young, in-demand painters.

As usual, the pace was much slower further north in the park, at the 10th edition of Frieze Masters, the elegant sister fair devoted to pre-21st century pieces. This year, major dealers such as Gagosian and Acquavella didn’t take booths at Frieze Masters, perhaps confirming the event’s reputation for inconsistent sales. But London still has the [most billionaires](#) of any European city, and big-ticket purchases do happen at that fair.

Unlike other events on the global art world agenda, Frieze Week in London offers a rich combination of high-quality fairs, museum exhibitions, gallery shows and auctions. Sometimes their interconnectedness encourages buyers; sometimes there is just too much going on.

White Cube's exhibition of [Michael Armitage](#) paintings was one of the week's must-see shows; it also included "guest" terra cotta sculptures by the Senegalese artist Seyni Awa Camara, at Armitage's request. This in turn triggered interest in a group of sculptures by Camara on sale at the 10th annual [1:54 fair of African contemporary art](#), offered by the London-based Gallery of Everything. After a flurry of reservations, four of those pieces, featuring multiple, tenderly interlocking figures, eventually sold, priced between £20,000 and £30,000, a gallery spokesman said.



An untitled 2010 terra cotta work by Seyni Awa Camara, which appeared in the booth

On Thursday evening, Christie's held an auction of 73 contemporary African works owned by Robert Devereux, a prominent London collector, that the house hoped might spark wider international interest in the art of that continent. Though the sale netted \$3.3 million, bidding was patchy and 38 percent of the lots went unsold.

A little earlier, Christie's did raise an impressive \$23.1 million for David Hockney's 1969 beachscape "Early Morning, Sainte-Maxime," of 20th and 21st century art. In a sale packed with yet more of those big colorful paintings by some of the market's most fashionable younger names, the much-as-expected \$3 million given for the enigmatic 2009 canvas "[Turning Point I](#)," by the Romanian painter Adrian Ghenie, went almost unnoticed.

One of the most coveted names in the international market during the mid-2010s, the Berlin-based Ghenie unveiled a new body of work, "The Fear of NOW," earlier in the week at the Thaddaeus Ropac gallery: 14 new paintings that explore the body language of this century, in which people are continually crouched over smartphones. "The loneliness of the artist is over forever," said Ghenie in an interview. "You're alone, and with everyone." Priced between 800,000 and 1.5 million euros, all the paintings were sold, according to Sarah Rustin, the gallery's global head of communications.



A scene from William Kentridge's five-channel projection "Oh To Believe in Another World," on display at Goodman Gallery. William Kentridge; via Goodman Gallery

But the most talked-about work on offer during Frieze Week was undoubtedly William Kentridge's virtuoso 15-minute video "[Oh To Believe in Another World](#)," showing in the basement of Goodman Gallery. By early Friday, Goodman had sold two of the seven editioned videos, priced at \$600,000 each, a gallery spokeswoman said.

Complementing a major survey of Kentridge's career at the nearby [Royal Academy of Arts](#), the five-screen video, combining newsreel footage, digital puppetry, a model of an imaginary Soviet museum and Shostakovich's Symphony No. 10, is a powerful elegy for political ideals and their "failure in the lived world," as Kentridge puts it in an accompanying catalog note.

Outside the art world, the free-market ideals of Britain's governing Conservative Party were continuing to be tested by the realities of the financial markets. On Friday, Prime Minister Liz Truss [fired her finance minister](#) and walked back part of a tax plan that had spooked investors and tanked the pound.

But at least for one week of the year, Britain's internationally minded art trade can still do the business.