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‘We Just Need to Create a Moment’: Art Market Looks to L.A.

Frieze comes to the West Coast as art sellers set their sights on Los Angeles as the next stop on the global circuit

By Kelly Crow

Is Los Angeles ready for its art market close-up?

A new contemporary-art fair, Frieze Los Angeles, kicks off Thursday on a movie studio’s back lot, and its arrival is stirring up the city’s ambitions to become a global art-market hub like New York, London and Hong Kong.

Los Angeles has been building a thriving art scene for decades, yet it lacks elements that tend to define the world’s blue-chip marketplaces—like a centralized gallery district and a clearly defined art season with high-profile, internationally followed auctions.

Nevertheless, Los Angeles’s art scene continues to mushroom: Between 2010 and 2017, art-related jobs in Los Angeles County grew 32%, outpacing New York, according to a newly published study on the creative economy commissioned by the Otis College of Art and Design.

The purchasing clout of Los Angeles’s collectors is also climbing. Marc Porter, chairman of Christie’s Americas, said the West Coast and particularly Los Angeles has been the house’s third-biggest source of new clients—after mainland China—for the past three years running. Sotheby’s West Coast chairman Thomas Bompard said twice as many \$5 million-plus artworks were sold to Los Angeles collectors last year compared with the previous one. Buyers there, he said, are getting more comfortable competing in the “big game.”

The addition of a well-known franchise like Frieze is the latest sign of the city’s ascent, market watchers said. “Los Angeles has never had that choke-point week where the auction houses and galleries get the art world’s undivided attention, and we sell big,” said Muys Snijders, U.S. head of postwar and contemporary art for Bonhams, which does hold auctions in the city. “We’re clearly looking to see if Frieze L.A. could become that pinnacle.”

Victoria Siddall, director of Frieze Fairs, said Los Angeles is overdue to claim its own slot in the event-driven, international art calendar, and when she and her team started thinking of expanding to the city a few years ago, they saw that this week in mid-February was relatively clear.

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Works like Irving Marcus's 'Fifty Years Ago' will be on view at Parker Gallery as part of Frieze.
PHOTO: IRVING MARCUS/PARKER GALLERY

“We’re not pioneers,” Ms. Siddall said. “L.A. has an extremely strong art scene—we just need to create a moment to get everyone there at the same time.”

Other fairs like Paris Photo Los Angeles have come and gone from the city over the years, unable to gain enough traction to continue. Local dealer Sarah Watson with the Kayne Griffin Corcoran Gallery said she thinks other fairs, in Goldilocks fashion, opened with too many or too few galleries.

With 70 galleries and a four-day sales window, she said, “Frieze feels just right.”

Nearly half of the galleries in the inaugural edition are from Greater Los Angeles. Local dealer David Kordansky plans to show paintings and wry sculptures that Kathryn Andrews created after she bought several film props, including a long, mercurial finger wielded by the villain in the “Terminator” movies. Parker Gallery, which opened two years ago in a Tudor-style house in the Los Feliz neighborhood, plans to show several brightly colored paintings by Sacramento artist Irving Marcus, who is 89 years old.

Several international galleries with local outposts like Hauser & Wirth are bringing pieces by Los Angeles’s hometown icons like Mike Kelley, whose \$1.8 million bed installation, “Unisex Love Nest,” has been tucked away in a European collection since it was created 20 years ago, said Marc Payot, gallery partner and vice president.

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The Frieze tent, designed by Thai architect Kulapat Yantrasast, will be set up beside the back lot of Paramount Pictures Studios. Visitors will be invited to wander a few blocks of New York street sets on the back lot nearby, encountering artworks along the way. The artist Lisa Anne Auerbach has tasked an artist-actor with the role of “Psychic Art Advisor,” doling out collecting advice from one of the mock brownstones, said fair curator Ali Subotnick, previously at the Hammer Museum.

Karon Davis, co-founder of the city’s hip Underground Museum, plans to place her white sculptures of children around the set of a school. Some of the figures in her installation, “Game,” sport antlers, a nod to the way school shootings have left some children feeling hunted, Ms. Subotnick said. The fair runs through Sunday.

Museums around town are showing support by holding cocktail events for VIPs and walk-throughs of their new exhibits, some of which just opened. These include the Hammer’s retrospective of Los Angeles conceptual artist Allen Ruppersberg and the Marciano Art Foundation’s show of Glenn Ligon’s searing wordplay work. At least two additional fairs are also opening in tandem with Frieze—a local mainstay that shifted its dates to open in step, Art Los Angeles Contemporary, and a smaller, new fair called Felix LA, co-created by the collector Dean Valentine.

For all the talk of wrangling the broader art world’s attention, Austrian dealer Thaddaeus Ropac, who is showing at Frieze, cautioned that the fair’s long-term success won’t likely hinge on convincing the same set of international collectors to keep flying back year over year.

“The Europeans will come at the beginning, but they won’t always come,” he said.

Hamza Walker, executive director of the nonprofit art space LAXART who is overseeing a series of artist talks at Frieze, said the true test will be if Frieze can cultivate more collectors from the industry that is this city’s lifeblood.

“When museums have galas, Hollywood is in the house,” Mr. Walker said. “But we need the fleet of producers, directors and lawyers buying contemporary art—they’re the real money in this town.”

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