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The Soulful Standouts Amid the Fanfare of Frieze LA

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The Paramount Studios backlot, where Frieze Special Projects were installed, like Hannah Greely's "High and Dry" (2019) (photo by Elisa Wouk Almino/Hyperallergic)

recently showed little interest in contemporary art. All this signals the increasing momentum embodied by Frieze's arrival, along with the risk of superficial production that big money always poses to the integrity and depth of art.

LOS ANGELES — Fairs are notorious as places where art goes to die, but while Frieze Los Angeles lives up to this cliché, its scale is not so leviathan as to choke all the life out of the work on display. In fact, you can get through the booths in a couple hours, then take a stroll to the Paramount Pictures Studios backlot to see the special projects and walk away feeling as though you may actually have had a positive experience.

It's easy (and fun!) to hate on art fairs, but Frieze's arrival in the City of Angels represents a maturation of LA's art market, which has been developing for many years and seems to be attaining critical mass. Now there is not only Frieze, but a host of concurrent fairs around town, including ALAC, Felix, and Spring/Break. The scene here has been fertile from its beginnings in the 1950s, but while the low cost of living and freedom from European traditions made this city an ideal place to realize new ideas in art, there was almost no local market to provide support. The situation is changing rapidly, particularly with the nascent involvement of the tech industry, which until

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As usual in large commercial fairs, most of what you'll see at Frieze quickly devolves into so much product, but there is still some soul to be found amongst the gaudy baubles. Jack Shainman presents a stunning Gordon Parks photograph, as well as "The Blues" (2017) by Carrie Mae Weems, a grid of photographs featuring Mary J. Blige. "Western Flag" (2017), a video by John Gerrard at Thomas Dane, is an arresting meditation on the 1901 Lucas Gusher in Texas, the world's largest oil strike at the time, which initiated the precipitous rise in carbon emissions now endangering a human future. Gerrard has built a digital simulation in which our point of view circles around a tall pole in the desert, the top portion emitting steady plumes of black smoke. Seen from one angle the smoke billows horizontally to resemble a dark flag waving in the wind, but rotate 90 degrees and the smoke is an apocalyptic mass of pollution rising to the sky. The ever-brilliant Michal Rovner's "Blue Hills" (2018) is a looping video of small figures walking in a barren landscape that blows away everything else in Pace's booth, with the exception of a small painting by Lee Ufan, whose quiet restraint speaks volumes in Frieze's frenzied environment.

There are other artworks, like Ufan's, that oppose showy gestures and end up commanding far more power than their peers. Three wall-based Melvin Edwards sculptures from the 1980s in Alexander Gray Associates are austere and unyielding. The Pit, one of LA's scrappier and more visionary galleries, includes the highly intellectual paintings of Allison Miller that engage your mind without a trace of visual pandering, and Florian Morlat's cardboard collages, wryly funny and unforgettably original. Château Shatto has a wall of Van Hanos paintings that are mordant, bizarre, and get right between your ribs.

The biggest challenge of an art fair is the way everything begins to blur, but the galleries that devote their entire booth to a single artist resist this malaise. The best of these is Commonwealth and Council's collaboration between Beatriz Cortez and Rafa Esparza, but there are others worth visiting: Susanne Vielmetter offers a sweeping look at Kim Dingle, Jeffrey Deitch presents Judy Chicago, Almine Rech shows Vivian Springford, Night has Claire Tabouret (including some stunning large works), and Acquavella focuses on Wayne Thiebaud, who turns 99 this year and still paints circles around just about everyone. Thiebaud's "Big Rock Mountain," completed in 2019, is a revelation from an artist who has reached art's mountaintop.

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