

London's Gallery Scene Is Persevering in the Face of Challenges

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Art Market

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Exterior view of Cedric Bardawil, London. Courtesy of Cedric Bardawil.

Brexit, bills, and bloody costs: Ask a London art dealer about what's grinding their gears at the moment, and they'll likely answer one of these three things.

Like U.K. business at large, London's art trade in 2024 is fighting a battle on numerous fronts. Brexit continues to be a costly, bureaucratic burden for many; the "cost of living crisis" is making business—from materials to services—more expensive; and local rental prices continue to climb. These factors are exacerbated by a tricky moment for the art market globally, too, with total art sales worldwide falling by 4% in 2023, according to Art Basel and UBS's "The Art Market 2024" report. Sales in the U.K. market, according to the report, were down 8% year over year in 2023, to \$10.9 billion.

All of this might give Londoners cause to feel slightly more downtrodden than usual. But in fact, there is still plenty for the city's art scene to be positive about, with new gallerists, collectors, art enthusiasts, and artists driving things forward, undergirded by the city's

longstanding strength of infrastructure: art schools, established galleries, institutions, and legal system.

“People want to live in London. It is the most cosmopolitan, open city, maybe in the West,” said James Mayor of [The Mayor Gallery](#), which has been operating in Mayfair since the 1920s. Mayor, who has been at the reins of the gallery since the 1970s, knows all too well about weathering choppy waters in a city that is prone to the occasional bout of economic volatility. “If the negativity that people like to spread about London would subside, London would boom,” he added.

Exterior view of The Mayor Gallery, London, 1973. Courtesy of The Mayor Gallery.

He has a point. The British art market is the third largest in the world behind the U.S. and China (it was the second largest in 2022), representing 17% of global art sales by value, according to the Art Basel and UBS report. That’s a comfortable 10% above its nearest competitor, France, which sits in fourth place with a 7% share. The sales decline in the U.K. is also not isolated, either, with the U.S.—by far the largest art market in the world—seeing its sales fall by 10% last year compared to 2022, according to the report.

“There was quite an agenda of people wanting to talk London down post-Brexit,” said Anthony Browne, chairman of the British Art Market Federation (BAMF), an influential industry body that represents the interests of the U.K.’s art and antiques market in its contacts with government. “Of course, when you have the cross-border regulatory changes and costs that accompany Brexit, a lot of people were pretty depressed about it. But we’re still by far the largest art market in a European time zone: No other art market [in Europe] comes anywhere close to London.”

Brexit issues—from legal red tape to bureaucratic processes—are persistent and continue to cause headaches, particularly for smaller galleries, and yet don’t seem to be deterring new players from entering the market. According to BAMF, the number of dealer and gallery businesses rose by 14% in the period from 2019 to 2023. In London, this is most visible in the center of town: In the years since the COVID-19 pandemic waned, many new galleries have set up there, while others have moved in at a dizzying pace.

Exterior view of Tiwani Contemporary, London, 2023. Courtesy of Tiwani Contemporary.

In Mayfair, the city’s most established gallery quarter where the likes of [Gagosian](#) and [David Zwirner](#) have their flagships, tastemaking new arrivals include [Tiwani Contemporary](#), Alison Jacques, and [Pilar Corrias Gallery](#). Bloomsbury has seen an influx of trendy new galleries such as Union Pacific, Hot Wheels, and Phillida Reid; and nearby Fitzrovia is [London’s fastest-growing gallery district](#), which has seen dealers open in double figures since 2020. Slightly further afield, Kensington’s Cromwell Place—an arts complex opened in 2020 where

galleries can rent short- or long-term spaces—provides easy-to-access venues for dealers looking to have a presence in London, hosting more than 60 galleries such as [Lehmann Maupin](#) and [Sundaram Tagore Gallery](#).

Other international names are setting up more permanent spaces, such as [Bernheim](#), which late last year opened a five-story gallery in Mayfair. For founder Maria Bernheim, who founded her gallery in 2015 in Zurich, London's internationalism was a key factor in expanding.

“London is a great city because it's in the English-speaking world, but then it also has a kind of European way of dealing with art,” she said. “It's really the best of both worlds.” Bernheim also noted that she is seeing an influx of younger collectors in London who are interested in collecting artists of their own generation. “They like to meet the artist,” she explained. “They want to build that relationship and they want to feel involved in a journey”

Miriam Cahn, installation view of “Solitude” at Bernheim, London, 2024. Courtesy of Bernheim.

Newer galleries across town are also bringing in a younger, engaged crowd. “There are newcomers to the art world, and people are culturally more open than they've ever been before,” said Soho dealer [Cedric Bardawil](#). “Art is becoming more and more democratic, and people are more interested in it as a result.”

As someone who opened his eponymous gallery in mid-2022, Bardawil is among a crop of young art dealers in the area who have set up shop in post-2020 Central London. Around half of the artists in his program are London-based, and he observes a local flourishing of artistic talent. “There is more and more good art coming out of art schools, and so much opportunity for young artists,” he said.

Many of these artists are now reaching worldwide acclaim and large gallery recognition. Nicolas Sorbac, who opened his first permanent space, NISO, in the area earlier this year, pointed to the rise of recent London art school graduates [Pam Evelyn](#) and [The Artsy Vanguard 2023–2024 alum Sarah Cunningham](#)—who were recently picked up by [Pace Gallery](#) and [Lisson Gallery](#), respectively—as cases in point.

“I see this new generation of mostly painters in London really thriving and getting picked up by top galleries—it gives me a lot of confidence,” he said. “Something interesting is brewing in London in terms of the quality of the artists that are being showcased.”

Li Hei Di, *The Willow Tree*, at Hoxton Square, London, 2023. Photo by Linda Nyland. Courtesy of London Gallery Weekend.

Much of this quality will be on view as part of [London Gallery Weekend 2024](#), which bills itself as the world's "largest event of its kind," and takes place from May 31st through June 1st. Each day of the weekend will be dedicated to a part of the city, with talks, workshops, and special events making up a packed agenda across more than 130 galleries. The organization—led by Edel Assanti founder Jeremy Epstein and [Thaddaeus Ropac](#) senior director Sarah Rustin—is operated in part with the voluntary help of figures from a cross-section of London galleries and reflects London's collegiate arts ecosystem, where galleries broadly take a supportive attitude towards each other.

"There are many amazing galleries on the commercial side of things that are popping up and there is excitement with younger dealers and galleries. But then there are also galleries like us who have had a lot of experience and are happy to share that with the younger dealers, and just say, 'Look, we've been through the thick and thin and this is how you survive it,'" said Sasha Gomeniuk, a senior director at [Hales Gallery](#), which first opened in 1992 in East London.

Basil Beattie, installation view of "Recalling Echoes" at Hales Gallery, 2023. Photo by Linda Nylind. Courtesy of London Gallery Weekend.

Newer galleries can also benefit more established names, noted Jade Y. Turanli, director of [Pi Artworks](#), which opened its Fitzrovia space in 2013. "It's a competition but a healthy competition," Turanli said. "Ever since COVID, sharing and collaborating between galleries has been very fluid and easy. I think it helps to nourish both the artists and the galleries."

While this nexus between collectors, artists, galleries, and art enthusiasts (including, as noted by Bernheim, the "bunch of people [that] just come for the drinks") remains strong, several of the galleries Artsy spoke to acknowledge the fragility of the current situation. Galleries such as Parafin and fairs such as Masterpiece, for example, are among those that have been forced to close their doors recently due to a challenging economic landscape.

"I think that Brexit and the ongoing wars have had a major effect on the market," said Kristin Hjellegjerde, who founded [her eponymous gallery](#) in 2012 and has London spaces in Tower Bridge and Battersea. "People are not willing to risk and take chances. This is also happening in Berlin and Paris, not only in London. One needs to stay very strong to keep going through this period."

Installation view of "Mirror Mirror" at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, Tower Bridge, 2024. Photo by BJ Deakin. Courtesy of Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

A uniquely "London" problem, however, is the drop in funding for the city's web of cultural institutions, which have long been a source for supporting and growing the city's artistic talent. In 2022, The Arts Council England reduced its funding allocation in the city by £50 million (\$63.7 million), and in England overall, local authority expenditure on museums and galleries in England decreased by 37% from 2009–2010 and 2022–2023.

“The extreme underfunding over the years has led to a really dire situation in the public sector, which is an essential part of our ecosystem,” said Hales’s Gomeniuk. “Commercial galleries alone can’t provide everything that an artist needs to flourish.”

There are, however, signs that these issues are on their way to being addressed. Inflation in the U.K. may finally be waning, while organizations such as BAMF are actively consulting the government on VAT taxation to tackle some of the Brexit-related burdens experienced by galleries. The U.K. will soon hold a general election: Sir Keir Starmer, whose Labour Party is widely expected to win, has said that “the creative industries have the power and the potential for leveling up like nothing else.” And in London’s art scene, there is a sense that the city’s galleries and community are taking on these challenges with a resolute spirit.

“I’m a cautious optimist,” said BAMF’s Browne. “You’ve got to make sure we keep engaged with these things and try to solve these problems. But, left to our own devices with the right environment, I’m absolutely sure we can compete and maintain our position.”

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