

Frieze Week London Diary 2024 The Last Word – Nico Kos-Earle

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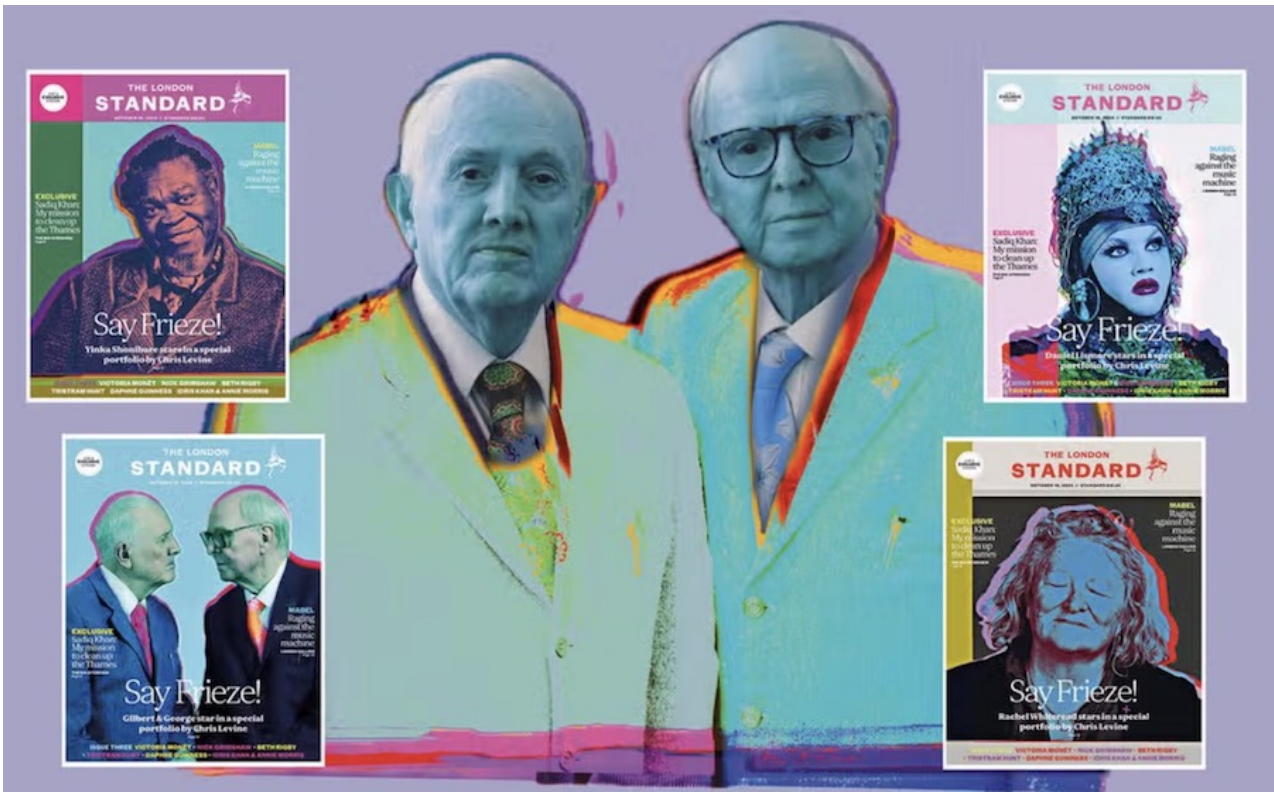


The global art community descended on London last week for Frieze, which opened on Wednesday in leafy Regent's Park. There was a cacophony of openings across all commercial, institutional, non-profit, and pop-up spaces, as this is the week to discover and be discovered. Frieze Week is a circus; it was a buyer's market this year. It is also an opportunity to jump into the flow of contemporary artistic production and be taken by the current trends, fetishes, and whimsy. Occasionally, they encounter a rock of ages (some define it as an excellent investment). Some of it might make you want to throw an egg.



Un Oeuf Is Un Oeuf @ TJ Boulting

My week began with a walk through the Fitzrovia galleries for a rendezvous at TJ Boulting with the epigrammatic Paul Cary Kent. Invited by the gallery to participate in 1000 Eggs: Women who identify as women invited to attend by Sarah Lucas. I had booked an egg-throwing slot for 2 pm. The place was rammed, the atmosphere fuzzy with hilarity and irreverence. I watched Paul don a wig and then throw two eggs at the centre of the white wall, now dripping in yellow yoke. I asked Lucas next to me what would happen to the coagulation beneath – would she collect it and make an omelette? “What about a massive cake?” she exclaimed gleefully. I stepped forward. To throw or not to throw an egg? The action seemed at once supremely wasteful but simultaneously delicious; it made me think of illicit sex. I picked up one egg and threw it hard but declined the second. After all, I am part of this system and not just an observer.



My day at the fair started with a gentle breakfast hosted by artist Chris Levine in conversation with Dylan Jones, who had commissioned a series of eight artists' portraits to be distributed on the Evening Standard covers ('Say Frieze!'), including Sir Yinka Shonibare, Cornelia Parker and Gilbert & George. From there, I took a detour through the Mayfair galleries – because the best shows are staged this week to coincide with Frieze; as an artist, I met at the phenomenal Jack Hillick site-specific show at Lungley gallery said, “whilst not everyone gets to these shows, we cannot deny this fair is good for the London art scene”.



Simryn Gill 'Shelter'

My circuitous route to the fair was intentional, as there was much debate about this year's reconfiguration. En route, I stopped into Simryn Gill 'Shelter', curated by Catherine de Zegher at Richard Saltoun (also on stand D7 at the back of the fair), highlighting the artist's pivotal role in contemporary ecological discourse. One of Australia's leading artists, Gill (Malaysian b. 1959), gives form to the experience of migration and displacement, capturing fragments of everyday dwellings and local ecosystems, which are too often overlooked. There, I picked up an earlier catalogue by de Zegher: 'Women's work is never done' (Ha! Ha! So much of the work done in the "art world" is done by an invisible league of underpaid, overworked women). In this, the artist Erin Manning writes of her curation: "What Catherine is doing... is feeling-into proximities and distances, seeing how different works expose openings for each other, creating conditions for the potential encounters." I would hold that thought with me through the day.

We live in a state of impermanence, and the art fair is both a symptom and a reflection of this. When I walked into the tent my view was underwhelming – the gallery that had been given pride of place made no effort to disguise the fact that this is a sales bonanza – framed prints were strewn and propped up against the wall. Immediately, I had an earworm with Pulp's lyrics:

"...I took her to a supermarket/ I don't know why, but I had to start it somewhere/ So it started there/ I said, "Pretend you got no money"/ And she just laughed and said, "Oh, you're so funny"/ I said, "Yeah... Well, I can't see anyone else smiling here/ Are you sure?"

To orientate myself, I tend to catch the tail of a theme, and in this first section, it appears that the miniature is having its moment. Perhaps this was seeded at Kehinde Wiley's show 'Fragments from the Treasure House of Darkness' at the Stephen Friedman Gallery on Cork Street (also at the fair B16). At the Hales gallery (A 24), a perfect miniature 15 x 20 cm painting by Martyn Cross, entitled 'Please add to me' caught my eye. An artist who explores the inner life through "painting the strangeness of the ordinary" this piece somehow captured my uncanny experience of the fair. Also representing the inimitable Hew Locke, this gallery deserved the fair's floor reshuffle.



Andisheh Avini Detail (b. 1974), at Dastan Gallery

Laterally, a row of miniatures, gilded with hard edges caught my eye by Andisheh Avini (b. 1974), at Dastan Gallery, its third participation at the fair (also featuring works by Reza Aramesh (b. 1970), Maryam Ayeen (b. 1985), Shahryar Hatami (b. 1983), Sahand Hesamiyan (b. 1977), Farideh Lashai (1944-2013), Meghdad Lorpour (b. 1983) and Mamali Shafahi (b. 1982). The gallerist took great care in explaining how this series 'Miniatures' explores the duality of his identity by combining iconic images like Persian calligraphy, decorative motifs, and portraiture with occidental concepts of minimalism and abstraction. Avini's approach speaks to a larger globalised society of the displaced, gently calling out the Western tendency to exoticize the East while neglecting its people. My heart heaved with sadness; these works are a magnificent representation of cultural preservation in a time of erasure and what images we carry in our hearts when we are displaced.

It struck me that perhaps this is why the miniature has become so desirable – with so many wars flaring and people fleeing – small and portable has become a necessity of cultural preservation. By contrast, the fair's new layout was a reminder that the contemporary art world performs in temporary structures. How wonderful it would be if this site in Regents Park could somehow absorb every iteration of the fair into a growing structure – think stalactites and stalagmites. Instead of supermarket vibes, there would be a festival hall of sorts.



Nengi Omuku

Frieze tries to address this with curated sections such as 'Focus' (sponsored by Stone Island), which features 34 solo and dual presentations from artists and galleries spanning five continents, including new spaces that define London's cultural scene. It also has an Artist-to-Artist section, which is usually the best way to spot a rising star. Nengi Omuku, now represented by multiple galleries including Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery but showing here with Pippi Houldsworth Gallery, was selected by Sir Yinka Shonibare and Magda Stawarska at the Yamamoto Keiko Rochaix gallery, was selected by Turner Prize recipient Lubaina Himid. Incidentally, this gallery also represents Turner Prize nominee Delaine Le Bas, a strong contender for the win.



Billy Childish Frieze 2024 © Artlyst

Moving into the depths of the fair, it became clear that there was one booth everyone was talking about – C 13 Lehmann Maupin – where Billy Childish was painting and selling live for the duration of the fair. Oh, the drama, the excitement! It seemed everyone but me was enthralled. Have we come to this? Can we not preserve some mystery? I love his Munch skies, desaturated colour palette, and self-defined border entirely around every scene, but I felt claustrophobic. Thankfully, a meeting with Daragh Hogan at the Kerlin Gallery with Domo Baal lightened my mood.



Elizabeth Magill Kerlin Gallery Dublin

I had been drawn in by a miniature work of wonder by the artist Elizabeth Magill, capturing the softness of a landscape as dusk, or perhaps dawn, draws it under a damp cloak of darkness. They were familiar to me and seemed to echo my sense of a theme – that we all need to hold somewhere beautiful in our minds, especially now. All my best conversations at the fair were quietly like this, like one I had with the Kalfayan Galleries from Athens about the miniature series by Fardia el Gazzar – painted in memoriam of a lost connection to place whilst in lockdown.



Speaking of connections and places, I suppose part of the purpose of this international fair is to encourage us to visit the galleries afterwards. At the Ruinart stand later, in conversation with curator Fabien Vallerian, I found some big ambitions that aligned perfectly with their chosen artists. Having just opened a sensational new pavilion and sculpture gardens at 4 Rue des Crayeres, he told me, “whilst honouring heritage and looking to the future, this historic location embodies the Maison’s commitment to blending tradition and modernity in perfect harmony”. So French. Can we come?

At their Frieze stand, I met the gentle Marcus Coates and his gallerist Kate Macgarry, who brought a little magic into the tent by recalling the birdsong with his magical calendar of listening. “17 March, Goldcrests are calling with an almost inaudibly high ‘see-see-see’/ 18 March, Female wall lizards are burying the eggs they have just laid, they will not return to them/ 19th March, Wrens are singing from higher in the trees. Their songs carry further, but they are more exposed to predators.” Just outside this tent, I was reminded that nature is all around. Listen to the birds because they might not all come back next year...

Nico Kos Earle October 2024