

Local Buyers Wrap Teeming Art Basel: High Attendance at Annual Fair Vexes Some Attendees, but Encourages Dealers

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By Erica Orden



Potential buyers stand in front of Kehinde Wiley's oil painting 'Femme Piquee Par Un Serpent' (2008) during the Art Basel Miami Beach fair.

MIAMI BEACH—Putting to rest any doubts that Art Basel Miami Beach had rebounded from recessionary doldrums, on Saturday afternoon the fair's entrance was briefly shuttered by fire marshals after the convention center reached its 10,000-person capacity.

"I'm having a panic attack," said one man standing just inside the gates as he strained his head to spot his companions stranded among the crush of disgruntled visitors on the other side.

"This was the first time that we slowed the entrance and it was a direct result of the fact that daily attendance was up by 16% from last year," said Dan Tanzilli, a spokesman for the fair.

About 20 minutes later, the Miami Beach Fire Department instituted a one-in-one-out policy—just in time to allow New York Yankees third baseman Alex Rodriguez and his daughter to slip through.

The high attendance prompted no complaints from dealers, of course, as swift sales continued through the weekend. Major collector and real-estate developer Aby Rosen purchased Galerie Gmurzynska's vibrant blue Yves Klein sponge sculpture "SE 250," which carried an asking price of \$1 million, according to a person familiar with the matter. (A spokeswoman for Mr. Rosen, Kathleen McMorrow, said she could not immediately confirm that sale.) By Saturday evening, Gagosian Gallery had replaced nearly all of the artwork in its booth.

The busiest day of sales for New York gallery Metro Pictures, which represents artists including Cindy Sherman, came mid-way through the fair, on Friday, after the private preview and first public day. At Salon 94, which sold all of its Jules de Balincourt paintings, as well as a Marilyn Minter painting with an asking price of \$130,000, "We met our mark

and then some,” said gallery representative Luis Alonzo. Asked for details on “the mark,” Mr. Alonzo laughed. “Gazillions.”

New York dealer Zach Feuer said his major works, priced between \$10,000 and \$135,000, including two Nathalie Djurberg videos which sold for €19,000 apiece, were more popular than the more modestly priced drawings (\$800-\$2,500) hanging in his booth. “People don’t want the little drawings—they want the big things,” Mr. Feuer said. “It was a big hit.”

Mr. Feuer paused an interview to place on reserve a work by Dasha Shishkin for a woman who shrieked, “I love that so much, I just want to have sex with it.”

That sentiment had been taken to an extreme the previous evening, when New York-based artist Ryan McGinness opened an exhibition of new paintings at Club Madonna, a strip club several blocks from the fair.

Though they glowed in the blacklight, Mr. McGinness’s four paintings were perhaps less captivating for some attendees than the nude dancers gyrating on platforms and hanging from poles in the center of the club. But no matter: Mr. McGinness had already sold two of the \$75,000 paintings.

In a backstage dressing room, as the softspoken Mr. McGinness oversaw the bodypainting of dancers to match his artworks, he said he plans to stage a similar event in New York at Larry Flynt’s Hustler Club during the Armory Show in March.

Still, despite a return to flash and frenzy, perhaps the most valuable work on display at the fair, a 1957 Mark Rothko painting, “Saffron,” estimated around \$30 million, according to a person familiar with the matter, remained without a red dot at Galerie Gmurzynska’s booth by the fair’s final day.

While director Mathias Rastorfer was explaining that he was not surprised that the Rothko remained available despite interest from two private collectors (because it’s “not the kind of thing one typically buys on the spot at a fair”), a performance artist who been circulating the aisles stopped in front of the booth. The woman had clothed herself in plastic shopping bags from department stores such as Macy’s and Galeria, and had affixed to her chest a sign reading “Wall Street Art.”

As Mr. Rastorfer said he had heard rumors that the woman was a Belgian collector, she tilted her head to the ceiling and unleashed a melodramatic yodel, causing people in the vicinity to turn and stare in confusion.

“Well,” Mr. Rastorfer said, referring back to the Rothko. “That’s not going to help sales.” He may have been mistaken: By Sunday evening, the Rothko had been placed on reserve.