

In Its Third Edition ART15 London Is Still Finding Its Feet

Kitsch rubs shoulders with the genuinely appealing and thought provoking.

Colin Gleadell, May 22, 2015

Coming from the stable of contemporary art fairs run by Sandy Angus and Tim Etchells—who sold their Hong Kong art fair for a sizeable but undisclosed profit to Art Basel—Art 15, which is currently running at London's Olympia, is now in its 3rd year. Billed as the most global of all fairs, galleries come from 40 different countries, but it is still searching for an identity.

This year, it was under the new directorship of Kate Bryan, who formerly ran the Cat Street Gallery in Hong Kong and Fine Art Society Contemporary in London, both exhibitors at this fair. Bryan had reduced the number of galleries in the fair, but that did not disguise the high turnover in exhibitors, for some of whom it is just not high-end enough, fashionable enough, or commercial enough in terms of sales. It is therefore still a fair with potential, but needs to realize that soon (see What To See And Buy At Art 15 London Art Fair).



Artwork by Stella Vine

With the help of an excellent talks program and the annual private museum owners conference—masterminded by Chinese art guru and former director of London's ICA, Philip Dodd—a solid phalanx of international collectors makes an appearance here, though I'm not sure the art would attract them on its own. Spotted on day one were David Roberts (UK), Don and Mera Rubell (USA), Ajay Pirama (UK and India—cruising the high end Indian art galleries), Kamir Maleki, Stuart Evans (Simmons and Simmons collection), fashion designer Roubi L'Roubi, and a bevy of well-heeled young socialites who dip their toes into the fashionable art world.

On day two for the talks, Patrizia Sandretto de Re Rebaudengo (Milan) and Wang Wei (Long Museum Shanghai), were also in attendance. But first blood in terms of sales went to British pop star, Florence Welch (Florence and the Machine) who bought a portrait of American rock star, Jack White (The White Stripes) by Stella Vine at The Cob Gallery whose whole stand was devoted to portraits, mostly on paper, by the former stripper-turned-artist priced between £5,000 and £7,000.

There's a lot of entry level art at Art15. In the central mezzanine, reserved for emerging galleries, Kevin Kavanagh from Dublin said he had a lot of interest in the nicely crafted small paintings and sculptures of Nena Lahart, priced from £800 to £2,200, but was waiting for someone to bite.

There's also a lot of humor. Unix Gallery from New York had a head of late British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, housed, Marc Quinn style, in a fridge, by Spanish artist Eugenio Merino. But it wasn't made of Maggie's blood, and the door only turned the lighting on and off this macabre piece, which they sold for "about £50,000." Cutting a distinctive figure on the stand was Haitian artist, Engels (yes, his dad was a Marxist), with his cut and torn canvases in true arte povera style.

Talking of blood, Norwegian artist Morten Viskum sat calmly throughout proceedings surrounded by screenprints of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, which he had smattered with different colors of animal blood, applied, not with a brush, but a severed hand. He wasn't prepared to say where he got that from. "I'm not really a painter; I'm a performance artist," he explained, and the residue of this performance was priced at £5,000 for each blood-spattered print, which will help pay for the next act.

And there in the aisle, surrounded by entry level art, was a tricycle laden with bronze balls, looking very much like the once-fashionable Indian artist, Subodh Gupta. And indeed it was by Gupta, courtesy of the relatively high end secondary market dealer, Omer Tiroche, and priced at £500,00

Son of established dealer, Micky Tiroche, Omer is following in his father's footsteps and just opened a gallery in London. Art 15 will help to make him better known. His stock was an array of blue-chip names from Damien Hirst and Cecily Brown from the West, to Yoshitomo Nara and Lee Ufan from the East. Top price was £750,000 for a jazzy stage set by David Hockney, but first sale was a monumental painting by the globally popular Julian Opie, at £75,000.

Notably high end were a couple of the Indian art galleries. Delhi Art gallery from New Delhi, Mumbai, and New York is thinking of opening in London and brought good examples by the progressive group of modern artists: FN Souza, whose dark 1956 head was priced at £225,000 and large painting of Mother Theresa of Calcutta by M. F. Husain, priced at £350,000.

"High end" at Art15 really means something with a bit of history (apart, that is, from the succulent chain mail style bottle top wall hanging by El Anatsui with the October Gallery that must be around the \$1 million mark). For the Brits there were some interesting small black and white abstracts by Bridget Riley with her agent, Karsten Schubert. Two sold for £150,000 each at the opening.

But what about Northern Asia, which had a significant presence? The Asian Art Center from Beijing and Taipei, had brought a wide selection, led by their most successful artist, Li Chen, who has several of his sleek, bubbly figures (inspired by Buddhism, I am told, and priced up to \$300,000 each) currently basking in the Mediterranean sunlight in the distinctly un-Buddhist setting of the Cannes Film Festival (see Larry Gagosian Chucked Out of Cannes Premiere for *Turning Up in Sneakers* and *Meet the First Ever Official Artist in Residence at Cannes Film Festival*).

Across the aisle with Hong Kong's 10 Chancery Lane Gallery I was struck by some 1980s abstracts by Huang Rui. They would have been banned at the time in China, but looked well preserved and suitable for a serious historical collection at £50,000 or £60,000 each.

Biggest Chinese spend of the day, though, was on Japanese artist, Atsuko Tanaka, a member of the reappraised Gutai group of post-war Japanese action artists who had three paintings with the Tezukayam Gallery from Osaka, and they all sold to collector from China for between £50,000 and £185,000 each.

As I left I found myself asking, who is this fair for? There was an awful lot of kitsch, rubbing shoulders with the genuinely interesting, appealing and thought provoking. So I couldn't quite put my finger on the answer. It's certainly not for everyone.

Art15 is open from May 21-23 at Olympia Exhibition Halls, London