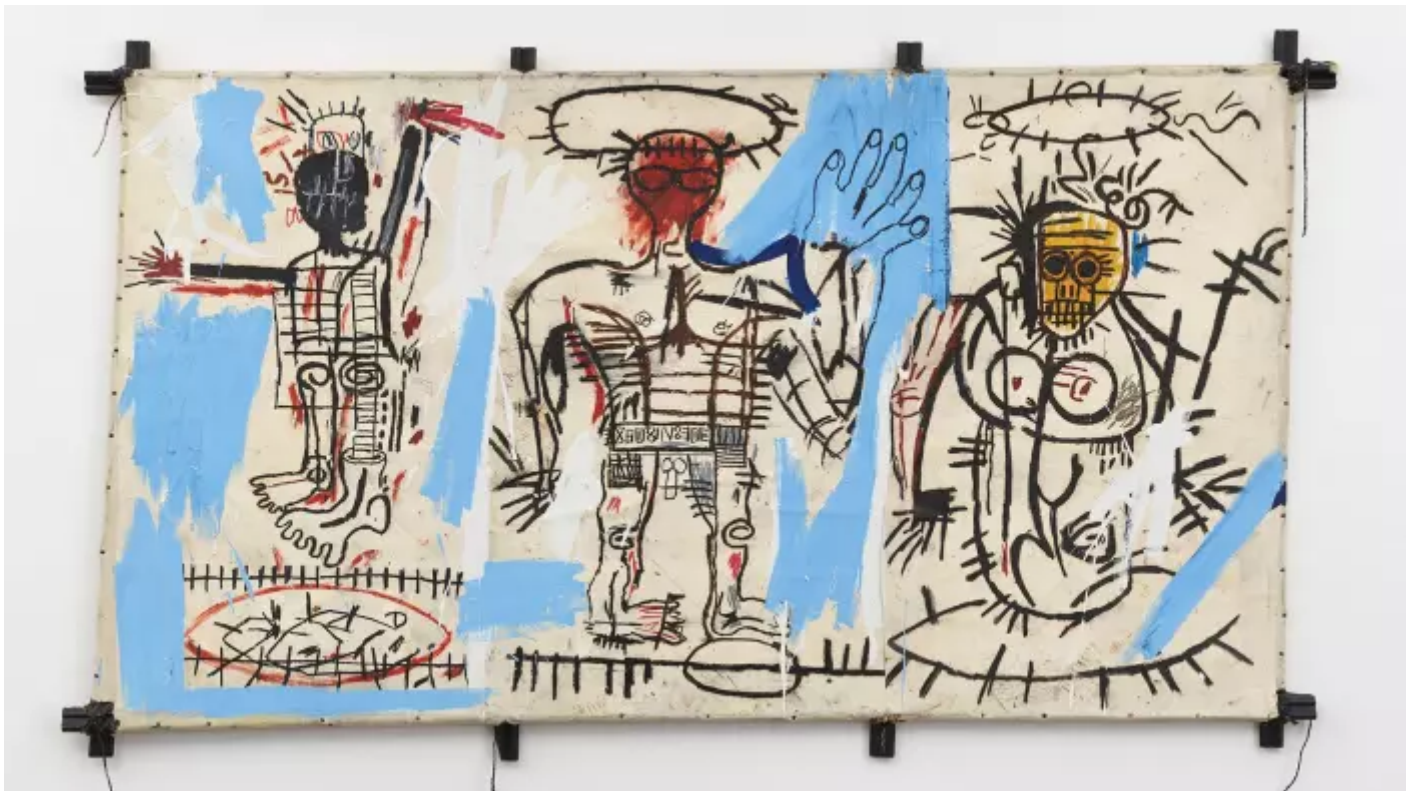


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Collecting

Art Basel 2017 opens with strong sales for blue-chip artists

The current taste for weighty, pricey artists plays to the strength of the fair



Jean-Michel Basquiat's 'Baby Boom' (1982) at Lévy Gorvy © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, ADAGP, Paris and ARS, New York 2017

YESTERDAY by **Melanie Gerlis**

It isn't every week that commercial flights into Basel get delayed because of the sheer volume of private jets coming into its airport. But when the Art Basel fair comes to town — as it has this week — normal patterns no longer apply.

The well-heeled international set, together with curators from global museums and other institutions, were out in force for Tuesday's high-energy VIP opening and sales were made quickly and at all levels by the exhibiting galleries, of which there are 291 in total.

"I've never had such an active first hour in the 15 or so years I've been showing at this fair," said Dominique Lévy, co-founder of Lévy Gorvy. Her early sales included works by Yves Klein, Günther Uecker and Dan Colen, a recent addition to the gallery's roster.

The current taste for weighty — and pricey — artists, a reaction to the uncertain political and economic backdrop, plays to the strength of the venerable fair, now in its 48th edition. “Ten years ago, everyone raced upstairs for the exciting new artists, now they rush downstairs for the opportunities in the blue-chip, postwar market,” said the art adviser Hugo Nathan.

The booth of New York’s Helly Nahmad gallery includes Pablo Picasso’s “Homme Assis” (1969), priced at \$11m, and Wassily Kandinsky’s 1924 “Berührung (Contact)” for \$3.5m. Montreal’s Landau Fine Art bursts with Modern masters, including Picasso’s “Homme à la pipe” (1969) and René Magritte’s “La corde sensible” (1960), priced at \$29.5m each. The latter sold for the equivalent of \$18m at Christie’s in London at the end of February. “Premium works are in such short supply. You pay tomorrow’s prices for great things,” said high-end art adviser Melanie Clore.

Works by Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose “Untitled” (1982) sold for a record \$98m (\$110.5m with fees) at auction in May, pepper the ground floor, in particular paintings from 1982, the artist’s most sought-after year. Van de Weghe has “Crisis” (1982) priced at \$8.5m, among others; Acquavella Galleries has “Three Delegates” (1982, sold for less than \$20m) and Lévy Gorvy has “Baby Boom” (1982) on hold for \$32m. “Dealers haven’t raised Basquiat’s prices since the auction but the way people look at his work may have changed. He probably gets more attention,” Brett Gorvy said.

Other multimillion sales reported from the fair’s first day included Philip Guston’s “Scared Stiff” (1970, around \$15m) from Hauser & Wirth and Pino Pascali’s radical recreated military canon “Cannone Bella Ciao” (1965) which went to a European Foundation from Luxembourg & Dayan.

More adventurous works can be found on the fair’s first floor, which generally fields younger and cheaper artists, though here, too, much of the art on show has some serious institutional validation. “Fewer people are willing to take risks on more experimental work right now,” said Nicholas Baume, director and chief curator of New York’s Public Art Fund, who was at the fair’s opening. Among Maureen Paley’s sales were Wolfgang Tillmans’s “paper drop Oranienplatz a” (2017, \$100,000), hot on the heels of the artist’s well-received show at London’s Tate Modern and his current exhibition at Basel’s Fondation Beyeler (until October 1). Goodman gallery sold several editions of Candice Breitz’s 2017 video “Profile” (€10,000 each), a work that extends the artist’s showing in South Africa’s pavilion at this year’s ongoing Venice Biennale.

Historical works were also selling from galleries that generally have a more cutting-edge reputation. Dealers Emmanuel Perrotin and Simon Lee have joined forces at the fair with a floor in their three-tier booth dedicated to 1980s works by Hans Hartung, selling for between €70,000 and €300,000. At Sean Kelly’s stand, early sales included Callum Innes’s “Exposed Painting Prussian Blue” (2017) for £100,000. “This market is conservative, but there is still a certain quality to the conservatism. Galleries simply show the best that they can at this point of the year,” said Paris dealer Jocelyn Woolf, whose booth includes a 1962-63 seven-part work by the 77-year-old German conceptual artist Franz Erhard Walther (€250,000).

Works with a political edge were also selling well, though these were less in evidence at the Basel fair than at recent events including Frieze New York and Art Basel in Miami (the latter held just three weeks after the US election). Jack Shainman sold Hayv Kahraman’s “Mnemonic Artifact” (2017) for \$50,000, which reflects the displaced memories of the Iraqi-born artist who found refuge in Sweden in the 1990s when only 10 years old.

Luckily collectors do still want to have fun with art and the relatively small number of performance and participatory works were attracting the opening-day crowds. Particularly popular was Urs Fischer’s “The Kiss”, a remodelling in plasticine of Rodin’s iconic sculpture that visitors are invited to touch, inscribe or rework through the week at Sadie Coles booth. Both of the two available editions sold for \$500,000; the buyers get a new version while the Art Basel work gets destroyed after the fair. It’s a serious work — Coles says it is about the process of distortion through time — but it also injects some fun into the heavyweight fair.

To June 18, artbasel.com

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