

# A PARTY WITH A PRICE TAG

Frieze Art Fair  
★★★★☆



Mark Spiegler  
ART

When the founders of *Frieze* magazine, Matthew Slotover and Amanda Sharp, announced in 2003 that they would hold a contemporary art fair in Regent's Park, doubters abounded. The notion of such a high-end event taking place in a tent, in a park, in London, in rainy October seemed ill-advised. Even if no works got soaked or stolen, art world insiders noted a more fundamental problem: Charles Saatchi aside, Britain's collector-base pales in comparison to continental rivals such as Germany, Belgium and Switzerland – let alone America.

But over the past three years, the *Frieze* pair's vision has been buoyed up both by a booming art market and by London's fast-growing role as the base for billionaires from the Middle East and eastern Europe. Just as importantly, the art world's collectors, critics and curators have proved themselves willing to endure the logistical hell of the city – putting up with outrageous taxi fares and heavy traffic in order to see exhibitions spread out from Battersea to Bethnal Green while following a party schedule that might take them from hearing Human League play the Phillips de Pury party near Victoria to crashing the grungier *Artforum* magazine cocktails at a Hackney bar.

This was precisely what Sharp and Slotover had imagined – an art fair which functions as the nexus of a moment in which the art world descended upon London. The city's museums have played along perfectly. And the auction houses have piggy-backed onto the fair, transforming their lacklustre mid-season sales into highlights of their autumn.

In the tent itself, the sales started even before the fair officially opened, as the Tate's acquisitions committee strolled through with a £150,000 budget to spend on a dozen different artists. At 11 o'clock the next morning, a few hundred VVIP collectors sprinted in, major buyers such as Saatchi, François Pinault from Paris, Rosa de la Cruz from Miami, Dakis Joannou from Athens and Eli Broad from Los Angeles. By the time 'real world' celebrities arrived that afternoon – Claudia Schiffer and Gwyneth Paltrow both bought, Jude Law, Kate Moss and Valentino were seen scouting – the best pieces had been snapped up, or at least reserved, by the art world's bold-face names.

Competition for good works was steep, and the prices reflected that. When *Frieze* began, the art-market's conventional wisdom held that nothing much over £25,000 was likely to sell. This year there were many pieces sold in the £100,000 range; Hauser & Wirth even sold a Paul McCarthy piece for \$500,000. In a world where June's Art Basel still ranks as the *ne plus*



**Sex and somnolence sell**  
**A woman sleeps away the afternoon in the Vitamin Space (main picture), and Julian Opie's strippers**

*ultra* of art fairs, *Frieze* has firmly pulled away from New York's wintertime Armory Show and now rivals December's Art Basel Miami Beach. It helped that Slotover and Sharp had done triage this year in the selection – after expanding from its initial 124 galleries to 160 last year, it cut back to 152 for this edition.

Architecturally, one could also feel the difference. *Frieze* was no longer a scrappy fair with narrow aisles and far too many small booths, but instead felt expansive, its layout featuring several large piazzas, each with a temporary tree planted at its centre. The tent's first architect, David Adjaye, had built a glamorous marquee in the middle of the park, part of the *Frieze* campaign to establish itself on the international circuit. But with its reputation secured, *Frieze*'s new architect Jamie Fobert could reveal its essential 'tentness' – his entry ramp gave visitors a peek into the tent's trusses, heating pipes and light riggings.

Current events figured strongly in the fair in the form of a rocket 9.5 metres long by Germany's Cosima von Bonin (sold at nearly £100,000 to de La



Cruz), a stack of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* translated from Arabic and imported from Lebanon by Switzerland's Christoph Buchel, and a Guantánamo Bay isolation cell built by Germany's Gregor Schneider.

Not that it was all super-serious: the London artworld's favourite bad-boy funnymen, Jake and Dinos Chapman, did a marathon drawing session in the White Cube booth, churning out the sorts of portraits usually crafted on pavements for tourists, albeit at slightly higher prices – £4,500 per sketch. Naturally, the fair crowd ate it up. And Julian Opie's mildly abstracted strippers had their audience – sex sells. More lyrically, China's Vitamin Creative Space paid a woman to sleep in the middle of the fair. It worked: with earplugs and sleeping pills, the somnolent artwork usually stayed in place until mid-afternoon. The rights to this piece were sold for \$12,000.

Reflecting their magazine's reputation for favouring the cool over commercial, Sharp and Slotover have always commissioned artists to do projects at their fair. This year's most spectacular effort was Mike Nelson's massive *Mirror Infill* installation – an alternative dimension of sorts comprising narrow hallways that led to darkrooms filled with photos taken during the installation process, in which a giant patch of lawn becomes one of the great momentary marketplaces for art. The project was not marked on any of the fair maps, so people discovered it only by being tipped off or via the haphazard observation of a strange unmarked door between two gallery booths. But once inside it felt somehow like the old London that had given birth first to the YBAs and then to *Frieze* magazine – a darker, more ambiguous place, distant from the monied side of the art world. Yet intriguing in a way that one can never expect from today's mature and turgid marketplace.