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The New York Times

Brussels Art Week Expands at a Tricky Time



Independent Brussels offered 72 galleries showing in an old 1930s department store near the Grand Place.
Isabelle Arthuis for Independent Brussels

BRUSSELS — This staid capital of Europe suddenly has its own mini-equivalent of Frieze week in London. The addition of Independent, the highly regarded New York fair, to the city's perennial "discovery" event, Art Brussels, could potentially turn Belgium in April into a serious destination for collectors of contemporary art.

With the art trade facing challenging times — as are all luxury businesses that rely on international clients — and given the recent attacks in Brussels and Paris, it would seem to be a less than ideal moment for Brussels to crank up its reputation as a city for discovering and acquiring innovative new art.

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The inaugural European edition of Independent offered a preview on Wednesday, 72 galleries showing in a stylish, partition-free space in a disused 1930s department store near the Grand Place.

That evening, more than 20 local dealers kept their doors open late for Art Brussels' "Gallery Night," with free shuttle service available. And on Thursday, Poppositions, an experimental fair now in its fifth year, offered 25 international projects.

Art Brussels itself opened on Thursday, for the first time in the "sheds" of the former customs warehouse, Tour & Taxis, having relocated from the less central Brussels Expo.

Given that lineup, would the art world descend on Brussels the way it does in London in October or Basel, Switzerland, in June?

One of the few American visitors at the preview of Independent Brussels was the New Jersey art adviser Clayton Press.

"Americans are generally orientated to Art Basel and Frieze and FIAC," Mr. Press said, referring to the fall Paris fair. "They have a perception that most European art fairs are regional events. There's just so much art available at the moment, and there's a lot of confusion about price. They're comfortable with what they know."

In fact, nearly every nationality, other than Belgian, was conspicuous by its absence among the knowledgeable crowd at the Independent preview. And yet Belgium's pool of discriminating and discreet contemporary art collectors continues to be a draw for big-name international dealers.

"There is a great tradition here of early, committed collectors," said Gerard Faggionato, a partner at the megagallery David Zwirner, which was exhibiting on the ground floor of the Brussels offshoot of Independent. (The New York edition was founded in 2010.) "Belgium needs a good fair, but it was always going to be local, particularly this year."

To underline the point, Zwirner sold one from an edition of 10 of the 2010 photo "Inner City Apple Tree II" by Wolfgang Tillmans, who will be featured in a solo survey at Tate Modern in 2017, for \$8,000 to a Belgian collector. Another paid \$150,000 for a 2016 colored steel sculpture, "Yellow Chevrons," by the American artist Carol Bove, who has made artwork for the High Line park in New York.

Gavin Brown of New York, Maureen Paley of London and Chantal Crousel of Paris were also among the major international exhibitors having faith in Independent's decision to open in Brussels, rather than trying to crack the saturated markets of London or Paris.

Mr. Brown was showing five new paintings by the young Los Angeles artist John Seal that embedded psychedelic abstracts in wooden silhouettes of everyday objects. Two sold at the preview, priced at \$21,000 each.

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Tony Matelli's painted bronze sculpture of a weed was priced at \$14,000.
Tony Matelli and Sorry We're Closed/Photo by Hugo Maertens, Bruges

This week was all about such “discovery” quality art. The young Belgian artist Kasper Bosmans, 25, emerged at Independent Brussels as another name to watch. The Los Angeles dealer Marc Foxx was showing three new works by Mr. Bosmans, two of which sold at the preview, priced around 8,000 euros, about \$9,000.

These included a series of six paintings on wood mysteriously combining brilliantly colored mandorlas with heraldic crests of Italian towns.

Mr. Bosmans, like many of Brussels's artists, works in Molenbeek, the district that was home to several of the suspects associated with the recent terrorist attacks.

“It's affordable, very convenient and it's the beating heart of the Brussels art scene,” said Mr. Bosmans, who is featured on the cover of the latest issue of Belgium's H ART magazine. “It's the obvious place to have a studio.” He added that the artistic and Muslim communities lived “parallel lives” in Molenbeek.

Independent certainly might have the edge in cool over Art Brussels, but the stalwart local fair attracted far more visitors at the preview on Thursday.

In an effort to raise the overall quality at its new venue, Art Brussels, which is part of the Belgian-based Artexis-Easyfairs group, reduced the total number of participating galleries to 141 from 191, while increasing the price of booth rentals by about 30 percent.

The popular “Discovery” section, devoted to emerging galleries and artists, was moved to the front of the fair and expanded to 30 booths. There was also a new “Rediscovery” element, consisting of 14 booths with works by overlooked artists working from 1917 to 1987.

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The Austrian feminist avant-garde artist Renate Bertlmann — who has been using latex to make provocative performances, photos and sculptures since the 1970s — was probably the most startling of these. Among the works presented by Galerie Steinek of Vienna was one of Ms. Bertlmann's "washing lines" of latex objects, made in 2014 from a 1978 mould, priced, but not sold, at €30,000.

The "Discovery" section drew the biggest crowd, with local collectors intrigued by the work of Alastair Mackie at the shared booth of the British dealers Copperfield and Division of Labour. Mr. Mackie lives on a farm in Cornwall and makes conceptual art out of found natural objects. A pile of what looked like gray posters were in fact recycled wasp nests. These were priced at £10,000, about \$14,000, and a black marble geometric relief, filled with 474 cowrie shells, was marked at £8,500. It was reserved by a collector on Thursday.

"What happened a month ago hasn't affected the mood of Belgian collectors," said Sebastien Janssen, the owner of a Brussels gallery, Sorry We're Closed, who counted three hyperrealistic painted bronze sculptures of weeds by the New York artist Tony Matelli, priced at \$14,000 each, among his early sales at Art Brussels.

Mr. Janssen said that the attacks last month in Brussels were not unexpected, at least among Belgians.

"The Americans haven't come, and the attacks have been terrible for tourism," he said, "but it's still been an exciting week. Brussels has become a new center for contemporary art."

This may not be the year to judge Brussels's nascent contemporary art week. The sea of floral tributes outside the Bourse and the equally noticeable emptiness of tourist restaurants showed that the Belgian capital is still in shock after the March attacks.

But at least Independent Brussels and Art Brussels proved that while business might not be back to normal, life is still going on.