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## After a Year of Isolation, Frieze New York Strikes Notes of Normalcy as Uncertainty Remains

BY **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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Frieze New York 2021 seen from above.

CASEY KELBAUGH/COURTESY OF CASEY KELBAUGH AND FRIEZE

The experience of going to an art fair after a year of few in-person experiences of any kind turns out to be extremely strange before it turns slightly less strange and then not strange at all over the course of just three hours. The scene at the entrance of **Frieze New York**, on Wednesday was a bit scattered and

manic, as fairgoers fumbled to show proof of vaccination or negative coronavirus tests with more than a little anxiety in the air.

Once you got inside, though, with some time to calibrate, this scaled-down edition of Frieze—held this year at The Shed (the arts venue in Hudson Yards)—felt surprisingly open and free. Hosting 67 galleries and nonprofits compared to 190 at Frieze on Randall’s Island in 2019, The Shed makes more sense than expected as a site for the fair, which runs through Sunday. Different settings on three different floors make for a variety of environments, and there’s enough space to avoid a cramped-aisle feeling between booths—all the better for attempts at social distancing, however strenuous or not.

Though some of the art displayed lacks some of the pomp and spectacle of years past, dealers seemed pleased to get back to selling their wares in person after a period that has left so many feeling dazed.

“It feels good, but it feels strange,” said Casey Kaplan, whose booth is showcasing paintings by a new addition to his gallery’s roster, Caroline Kent. “I’m trying to remember how to socialize, with a mask and a little bit of face-blindness, combined with being out of practice. It’s tricky.”

Alexander Gray said Frieze’s timed-entry policy, which makes the crowd less a crush than a slow and steady stream, helped him ease back in. “One of the things that’s made it in some ways a soft landing is the flow of people,” said Gray, who is showing work by Melvin Edwards, Jennie C. Jones, Harmony Hammond, Lorraine O’Grady, Joan Semmel, and Valeska Soares. “It’s allowed us to have conversations without looking over our shoulder or being dragged by thirty people at once. The intimacy and scale are so right—I wish we could keep it like this.”



Visitors stroll the aisles.

CASEY KELBAUGH/COURTESY OF CASEY KELBAUGH AND FRIEZE



Gray said he was happy to be back in action in the city after spending time during lockdown in upstate New York and Palm Springs. “We become art dealers because we thrive on people’s energy,” he said. “Playing the role of educator and evangelist in front of artworks doesn’t work unless we’re with people, having conversations and making connections. The burnout of OVRs underscored that the art world is not scalable. It’s about relationships and intimacy, and that’s how it should be.”

The booth for Goodman Gallery, which operates spaces in Johannesburg, Cape Town, and London, was manned by Justin Davy, an associate director who moved to New York just before the pandemic. “It feels like a social experiment,” Davy said of the fair. “The overall feeling is one of excitement for being able to speak to people face-to-face about art again.”

But the situation in South Africa is quite different. “We’re just recovering,” he said of a dire wave of Covid-19 cases back home at the end of December. “But I think we’re in a bit of denial. Things are opening very quickly in South Africa and not many people are vaccinated.”



London’s Stephen Friedman Gallery is showing work by Sarah Ball.  
CASEY KELBAUGH

Because of international travel restrictions, some dealers could not make the journey to New York, giving Frieze a decidedly domestic feel. The directors of London’s Stephen Friedman Gallery asked Alexandra Eagle, a former intern, to serve as their proxy. “I’m in constant contact with them via WhatsApp,” she said. “It’s probably really strange for them and really stressful, not knowing how everything is going.”

On the walls around Eagle were paintings by Sarah Ball, an English painter who took anonymous photos from social media, newspapers, and magazines and transformed them into arresting portraits that seem to stare a viewer down.

Figurative painting prove more affecting at the fair than usual, a sensible result of the dulling absence of people over the course of a trying year. New York's Peter Blum Gallery has a delightful little Alex Katz painting of a woman in a white dress against a yellow background. There are beguiling portraits by Jonathan Wateridge at Nino Mier Gallery. And Marinaro has caught a lot of eyes by showing highly stylized Ridley Howard portraits of couples in various forms of embrace, which are both soothing and haunting at once.

Of the scene around him, Jamie Bayard, assistant director of Marinaro, said, "There's an energy here. In New York there's a lightness lately. People are eager to be out and about again, and they want to see art."



The booth for Marinaro, with paintings by Ridley Howard and sculptures by Johannes VanDerBeek.

COURTESY MARINARO

Despite the anxiousness at the start, the first day of Frieze settled into a state of normalcy. Hometown collectors like Agnes Gund and Glenn Fuhrman were joined by those visiting from San Francisco, like Helen Schwab, Komal Shah, and Katie Page, or Miami, like Mera Rubell. Museum directors Max Hollein (of the Metropolitan Museum of Art) and Thelma Golden (The Studio Museum in Harlem) also made appearances, as did at least one celebrity, supermodel Christy Turlington.

New York collector and film producer Debi Wisch said the toned-down fair is marked by "more engagement with the work and fewer distractions." Bree Zucker, a director for the Mexico City/New York gallery Kurimanzutto, agreed, "It's special to be back in a social

environment that is so welcoming after of a year of isolation for everyone, on so many different levels.”

And despite things starting to feel familiar, some in attendance are more cautious than overly optimistic. Dealer David Lewis, who is showing work by Barbara Bloom, Thornton Dial, and Tomás Esson, said, “It’s starting to feel like people are getting ready, like this is the beginning of something. But I feel like Covid has taught me not to expect anything ever. I just know that the mood is shifting and people are starting to feel like reemerging, without really knowing what that will look like. I know there’s another chapter starting, I just have no idea what it will be like.”

*Additional reporting by Sarah Douglas.*