

Frieze Masters review – for the billionaire who has everything, what about a Magritte?

Regent's Park, London

Bacon, Dalí, a relief from ancient Persepolis ... this treasure trove of classical and modern masterpieces is dazzling, then exhausting – and finally sickening



What do you feel about money? Is it sexy, beautiful, sublime? Or disgusting?

Like a giant conceptual artwork, the [Frieze Masters](#) art fair forces you to evaluate your attitude to obscene wealth. So much of the time, we talk about 21st-century society in abstractions. It's all very well going on about "the 1%" and producing data that shows inequality is twisting our world out of shape. The organisers of Frieze have done something much more graphic and useful. They have put the reality of money on display so we can walk among the 1%, study the art that's theirs to buy, and make a choice. Do we go along with this or not? Is it fun, or is it all a bit ... repulsive?

There should be two exits. At one door you get a Frieze bag with a fake Old Master painting in it. At the other you can join [Momentum](#).

I can't deny it's seductive, this moneyed art, this art of money. In a huge print of a 1981 Richard Avedon photograph at the Bernheimer Fine Art booth, a nude Nastassja Kinski lies eerily still as a giant snake slithers over her. By the time I reached it I was starting to fall into such a state of nauseous alienation that I saw Kinski as a symbol of [Art](#), about to be crushed by the lethal glamour of Money and the Market.

The work of art that really mirrored my feelings, however, was [Francis Bacon's Man in Blue VII](#) (1954) at the Robilant and Voena stand. The man in it, my double, my brother, floats there totally isolated in the void, locked in despair. All around him the dealers and collectors babble.

At the stall of Dr Jörn Günther, a dealer in rare books from Basel, I got into a conversation about prices. "What was that you said?" I stuttered after being told the price of a Book of Hours illuminated by the Master of the [Grandes Heures de Rohan](#). €1.9m, she repeated. I had to have it repeated again. And this is just one small item at a fair foaming with rare treasures.

At Frieze Masters you can buy a relief from ancient Persepolis, the palace of the rulers of Persia – if you've got £2.2m on you. Or perhaps you fancy a bronze plaque from the Oba's place in Benin? It's good to see the [spoils of the Victorian imperial raid](#) that destroyed this African civilisation are still making money. The fair also has the perfect gift for a modern Rockefeller: a Magritte painting that once belonged to Nelson Rockefeller himself.

As an art critic, what am I to make of this? I can admire Magritte as much as you want. His painting shows a street where the lamps are lit even though the sky is blue. It is at once a realistic picture of the ambiguous time between day and night and a confounding surrealist image of a world where time has stopped making sense. It is called *L'Empire des Lumieres* and was the best thing I saw. But in this context it just seemed a toy, a decoration.

The market whose power is on display here is horribly tasteful, terrifyingly intelligent, superbly educated. Posh people are purveying Ed Ruscha prints, Cy Twombly paintings, Picasso drawings, a ravishing painting by Bonnard, a medieval sculpture of an angel that may come from the Cîteaux Abbey.

At first it is dazzling, then exhausting, and finally sickening. Like being trapped in a golden lift with a man smoking a Montecristo, it is too close and confined an encounter with massive wealth for comfort. I can't see how anyone can enjoy this monstrous display of totally commodified culture as if it were art for art's sake. It is a celebration of the market that mocks the idea that art means anything.

The painter Mark Rothko once hoped his art could make "rich bastards" feel bad about themselves. At Frieze Masters, the rich bastards prove they own the world.