

What Sold at Art Brussels

ARTSY EDITORIAL
BY MOLLY GOTTSCHALK
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Art Brussels closed on Sunday, wrapping up four days of steady sales in the city’s historic Tour & Taxis building. The fair’s 35th edition welcomed 144 galleries from 28 countries to the former customs warehouse, where it had moved for the 2016 edition just weeks after the terror attacks of March 22nd.

A year later, the Belgian capital’s art scene is experiencing a new surge of momentum. Among other notable events this past week, C L E A R I N G inaugurated a new 5,400-square-foot space, and São Paulo’s Mendes Wood DM planted its flag in the city with a new gallery.

Across Art Brussels, dealers echoed the city’s resurgent spirit and reported overall satisfaction with sales. Accessibly priced and midrange works saw the greatest success, which isn’t to say a number of works weren’t sold in the six figures: **Robilant + Voena** sold a painting by Julian Schnabel to a Belgian collector for around £500,000; Galerie Mitterrand sold a 1967 work from a solo booth of Niki de Saint Phalle for between €150,000–€200,000; and Tina Kim Gallery sold a painting by Dansaekhwa artist Ha Chong-Hyun for €180,000–€200,000.

“There’s a good spirit,” said Galerie Lelong’s Nathalie Berghege, who placed a large painting by Günther Förg with a local collector for north of €250,000 on the fair’s first day. The gallery also sold a painting by 2016 Marcel Duchamp Prize nominee Barthélémy Toguo for €45,000 and a sculpture by David Nash for €22,000, among other works.

Berghege described a marked difference in the energy at Art Brussels this year compared to the challenges that faced the last edition. But she also spoke of uncertainty that remains in the air, from that caused by U.S. President Donald Trump to France's own highly-contested presidential election, in which the young, pro-EU Emmanuel Macron and far-right nationalist Marine Le Pen advanced to a runoff on Sunday. Berghege said that, against this backdrop, art is as crucial as ever before.

"Buying art is not only a pleasurable thing. It should also be a political thing," she said. "It is up to us working in art—collectors, museums, artists—to stay positive. We have to keep going. In France we say *ne baisse pas les bras*. Rebel."

Brussels gallerist Rodolphe Janssen also commented on the significant uptick in the mood at Art Brussels this year. "Everybody can feel it," he said. Among other works, Janssen sold a large oil on linen painting by Sean Landers for \$95,000, five bronze and marble works by Sam Moyer for \$9,000 apiece, a large painting by Sanam Khatibi for €20,000, a sculpture by Thomas Lerooy for €28,000, five woodcuts by Gert & Uwe Tobias for between €20,000–€43,000, and seven works by Léon Wuidar from the fair's Rediscovery sector for €4,000–€12,000 apiece. Janssen commented that Belgium's art market has certain advantages that allow it to be steadier than the market of other countries.

"The market in Belgium is always okay," he said. "There are people of all levels of money who are buying." The art market at large has cooled over the past two years, and become more top-heavy, but he said Art Brussels finds its strength by catering to the kind of art market experienced in the '90s.

"It's not a market for Russian billionaires like in Frieze; it's not a big fashion or social thing like [at FIAC]; it's not a fancy American fair like in Miami; it's a fair for European collectors who buy art to put in their house to live with. It can be \$10,000, \$100,000, or \$1 million," he said, but "it's not for storage."

Brussels collector Alain Servais, whose expansive private collection doubles as an artist residency, said "the frost is less present" in the current market. Sales had been fine, but not "ecstatic," he said, pointing to collectors taking more time to complete their purchases and making fewer buys overall. "Fifteen years ago there were 20 percent of the current amount of fairs and 50 percent of the current amount of galleries," he said. The market's infrastructure grew up for the wave of new buyers that flooded it in the mid-2010s, he said. Now, that infrastructure is still there but there's less business. He said galleries need to tighten their belts and adapt their strategies to this new reality, taking a more personal approach to dealing art once again.

Meessen de Clercq took this advice to heart. "We prepared quite thoroughly in terms of visiting the right people and preparing new works so people could actually discover things even if they know the gallery program," said gallery co-director Jan De Clercq. The gallery sold a work by Thu Van Tran for around €24,000, ahead of the artist's upcoming participation in the Venice Biennale; multiple works by Claudio Parmiggiani for between €50,000 and €100,000; several pieces by José María Sicilia for €10,000–€35,000; and several works for €4,000–€15,000 by Benoît Maire, who won Art Brussels's Solo booth prize.