

# FINANCIAL TIMES

THE ART MARKET

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## The Art Market: Fair play

Georgina Adam

### Art Basel owners build a new fair portfolio; Armory Show spotlights African artists; Sotheby's staff head for the door

In a major new initiative, the Swiss giant MCH, the parent company of the Art Basel group of fairs, is creating a division that will group a number of design and regional art fairs.

Completely separate from the Art Basel group, the new division will be headed by Marco Fazzone, who was previously on the Art Basel team as director for resources.

“Our objective is to work together with regional fairs, in partnerships, joint ventures or with other forms of collaboration,” says Fazzone. “The number of fairs will not be restricted; we are looking for quality, not quantity.” The new division is being created, he says, out of a belief that a strong art-fair segment “would strengthen the art market as a whole”.

Certainly such collaboration, with the experience Fazzone gained while at Art Basel, could benefit fairs by sharing expertise and achieving economies of scale in, say, VIP programming or communications. But the new grouping would not be “branded” as such, says Fazzone. “We want to keep each fair’s distinct regional identity, its DNA.” Even if there is no overlap between the two “brands”, the initiative will create a sort of “diffusion” range of more mid-market events, bolstered by proximity to and experience gained by the higher-end Art Basel fairs.

So which fairs will be in this new portfolio? MCH would only say that it is “discussing a number of art-fair partnerships”. These “potential partners” include Tim Etchells and Sandy Angus, and I put it to MCH that under consideration could be the duo’s new Singapore fair, to be held in 2017, ArtInternational in Istanbul and the London fair Art16. Discussions have also been taking place with Art Brussels.

MCH told me it would neither confirm nor deny these “specific suggestions”, saying only that it would “develop specific projects [and] announce them in due course once they are fully formed”.

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The VIP opening at New York’s Armory Show this week came the day after Super Tuesday, and so was against a backdrop of political jitters generated by the presidential election.

While many visitors denied that this was affecting buying, decision-making seemed slower, notably affecting works by younger, more speculative artists. Some smaller galleries did not make any sales the first day, while the bigger ones were certainly not reporting a rush.

The focus this year is on the African Perspectives section, with 14 galleries, half from Africa, showing artists from the continent or from the diaspora. For the curators, Julia Gross and Yvette Mutumba, the section is “a great opportunity for African galleries to come to a big-shot show like The Armory and show how professional they are”. Reflecting on whether African art is just the “flavour of the month”, they say the section is an opportunity to get greater visibility and shows that African art is sustainable. “It will still be there after the bandwagon has moved on to something else,” says Gross.



©October Gallery, London  
Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga's 'Lost' (2015)

Among the standout presentations in the section was that of the Sudanese artist Ibrahim El-Salahi at Vigo Gallery, with a number of works that featured in his 2013 Tate show (£8,000-£600,000); two colourful acrylics on canvas by the Congolese Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga (\$18,000, October Gallery); and photographic portraits by Namsa Leuba at Art Twenty One of Lagos (\$1,500-\$22,000).

In the main fair, meanwhile, many dealers were showing African-American artists. Kehinde Wiley’s giant, gaudy depictions of rulers on horseback, for example, featured on

a number of stands, with “Equestrian Portrait of Prince Tommaso of Savoy-Carignan” (2015) sold at Roberts & Tilton (\$250,000) and one of Philip III also finding a buyer at Sean Kelly (\$375,000). The fair continues until March 6.

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While the Armory is a cacophony of art on two scruffy Hudson River piers, the much smaller and calmer Art Show in the brooding Seventh Regiment Armory on Park Avenue stands in complete contrast.



Tim Thayer/Donald Morris Gallery  
Bob Thompson's 'Pieta Fragment' (1965)

America’s longest-running, dealer-organised art fair offers no VIP programme or other such bells and whistles but continues to draw a faithful clientele, mainly from around the Upper East Side. They come for American Modernism, vintage photography, Impressionist and Modern art — and more contemporary offerings, such as Deborah Butterfield’s large-scale horses made of bronze (Danese/Corey, \$425,000 each). This year many of the 72 dealers have organised solo shows: the magical Italian sculptor Fausto Melotti at Hauser & Wirth, vigorous paintings by Hernan Bas at Lehmann Maupin (all sold or reserved on first day, \$30,000-\$200,000); the curious Ron Gorchoff at Cheim & Read, with layered, shaped canvases (\$120,000, two sold); and the Polish-American Jack Tworckov, a contemporary of the Abstract

Expressionists who took a more geometric turn, at Alexander Gray (\$10,000-\$275,000).

Again, African-American artists are very much on the agenda: deceptively naive paintings by former slave Bill Traylor, who died in 1949, feature at Betty Cunningham (\$50,000-\$140,000), while Donald Morris shows Bob Thompson, who was inspired by European Old Masters to produce boldly coloured figurative paintings (nine of 13 works sold on first day, \$125,000-\$250,000). Until March 6.

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Sotheby's is haemorrhaging staff faster than you can say "Tad Smith". Just before the firm's fourth-quarter conference call, two more rainmakers announced they were off: contemporary specialist Alex Rotter, and Impressionist and Modern guru David Norman. Fielding questions on these departures, which come in the wake of Sotheby's acquisition of the art advisers AAP (Art Agency, Partners) for up to \$85m, chief executive Smith admitted that there had been "noise" about the "dislocations" caused by the shake-up. "We predicted this and we will get through it," he said, affirming that changes were needed in the New York operation and that the team there is now "the best".

However, the rush for the door continues, with the latest exit being that of Henry Wyndham, chairman of Sotheby's Europe, with the company for the past 22 years and a brilliant auctioneer. He says he has been mulling the decision for at least a year, and has a bucket list of things to do during a six-month break, among them walking Welsh border trail Offa's Dyke and taking the Trans-Siberian railway. He leaves on March 15, having stayed on for the Duchess of Devonshire auction this week, which was a predictable roof-raiser with £1.8m sold, well over expectations. However he isn't leaving the art market, he says, just moving on to what he calls "a new chapter in my life".

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*Photographs: October Gallery, London; Tim Thayer/Donald Morris Gallery*