

Still an Appétite For Buying

BASEL, Switzerland — Within a five-minute walk from Art Basel, the world's leading fair for contemporary art, is a small upstairs space frozen in the not-so-contemporary 1970s. Mirrors

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INSIDE
ART

and imitation wood paneling line the walls. A patchwork of African textiles covers the furniture, and the floors are a mix of linoleum, wood and carpeting. There is a bar, too, with lava lamps and a fake copper ceiling. Hits by Aretha Franklin, Donna Summer and Diana Ross play every night at ear-piercing decibels. On Wednesday morning, standing in the middle of it all dressed in baggy pants and a T-shirt was Mickalene Thomas, the 42-year-old Brooklyn artist who created the environment here. She calls it "Better Days" after a group of her

From Weekend Page 23

mother's friends who would hold parties, plays and fashion shows to raise money to fight sickle cell anemia, a disease that runs in her family. "Better Days" is the installation for the Absolut Art Bureau, sponsored by the Swedish vodka company Absolut in partnership with Art Basel, where more of Ms. Thomas's work is on display.

"I've done environments before, but this is the most three-dimensional," said Ms. Thomas, who recently had a much-praised exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum.

At the nearby fair, which runs through Sunday, her Chelsea dealer, Lehmann Maupin, is showing several of her paintings. One, "Hair Portrait Series #10," depicting the braided hair of four African-American women on wood panel with acrylic and rhinestones, was snapped up for \$55,000 just hours after the fair opened.

"Collectors these days are looking for artists that have museum and curatorial support," said David Maupin, one of the gallery's founders.

The cavernous convention center that houses the fair has booth after booth filled with blue-chip masters like Warhol, Picasso, Bacon and Calder, or artists who, like Ms. Thomas, have been the subject of recent museum exhibitions or are featured at the Venice Biennale, which opened this month.

There are also examples of works similar to those that brought enormous prices at the May auctions in New York.

"Galleries bring what they know the market wants," said Allan Schwartzman, an art adviser from New York.

As large and lively as ever, with 304 galleries exhibiting from 39 countries, Art Basel is still a magnet for big-money collectors and museum directors. Among those at the invitation-only opening on Tuesday were New York financiers like Donald B. Marron and Leon Black, the Miami collectors Donald and Mera Rubell and the Russian oligarch Roman A. Abramovich. Also seen perusing booths was

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Inside Art

Carol Vogel



COURTESY OF MICKALENE THOMAS AND ROBERTO CHAMORRO/ABSOLUT ART BUREAU

Mickalene Thomas's "Better Days" installation, running in conjunction with the Art Basel fair, where her works are on sale.

Richard Armstrong, who runs the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation; Alain Seban, president of the Pompidou Center in Paris; and Nicholas Serota, director of the Tate in London.

"I've been coming here since the 1980s, when dealers would bring works they couldn't sell in their galleries," said Jeffrey Deitch, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. "Now these dealers are like museum curators, working for months on their installations."

Just weeks after the buoyant May auctions, collectors still appear to have money to spend. Among the dealers reporting brisk sales was the Helly Nahmad Gallery. Its New York branch was represented here with a large booth filled with paintings and sculptures by Calder, Lucio Fontana and Bacon. By the end of Tuesday, more than six big-ticket works had been sold, including a 1961 Calder mobile for \$12 million and a 1968 painting by Fontana for \$6 million.

The Nahmads, a dynasty of dealers with spaces in the Carlyle Hotel in New York and on Cork Street in London, have been in the spotlight recently. In April, Hillel Nahmad, 34, known as Helly, was charged by federal prosecutors with playing a lead-

ing role in a gambling and money-laundering operation that stretched from Kiev and Moscow to Los Angeles and New York, where he is based. Mr. Nahmad, who has denied these charges, is missing from the fair this year; as part of his bail he had to surrender his passport.

But his cousin in London, who runs the family's Cork Street gallery and is also called Helly, said

Even after numerous record auction sales, collectors are interested.

he had seen a lot of new buyers. "They are from all over — Europe, China, Latin America and Italy," he said.

Late Picassos have been top sellers at auctions in recent years, and at Dominique Lévy, the New York dealer, "Tête d'Homme à la Pipe," from 1971, hung prominently in her booth. Priced at \$15 million, it had been sold by Thursday. Ms. Lévy is also in discussions with a collector to sell a 1959 untitled Barnett Newman drawing listed at \$7 million. (At Sotheby's last month

Newman's seminal painting "Onement VI," a deep-blue abstract composition from 1953, sold for \$43.8 million, a record for the artist at auction.)

One of the more talked-about collateral exhibitions in Venice during the Biennale's opening was an immersive installation by the Italian-born artist Rudolf Stingel. He covered the Palazzo Grassi with his own Persian-inspired carpeting on which he hung his abstract and photo-realist paintings. In Basel, canvases by him were in several galleries. Three of his works, each priced around \$2 million — at Massimo De Carlo, a gallery with spaces in Milan and London; Sadie Coles from London; and the Gagosian Gallery — were reported sold.

Drawings and sculptures by Claes Oldenburg, whose retrospective is at the Museum of Modern Art in New York through Aug. 5, could be spotted in many places, too. Leslie Waddington, the London dealer, was showing "Feasible Monument for a City Square: Hats Blowing in the Wind," a 1969 group of five crumpled canvas hats painted with enamel and shellacked. It was Mr. Oldenburg's visual reference to Adlai Stevenson, who in 1965 had a fatal heart attack on a London street as his signature hat was blowing away. (Priced at \$700,000, it sold on Thursday.)

A larger installation of Mr. Oldenburg's work was at the Paula Cooper Gallery from New York. Drawings, watercolors and sculptures, mostly from the 1960s, were on display. Among them was "Scissors Monument Cut-Out," a watercolor of two halves of a pair of scissors, from 1967. It sold to a New York collector for \$200,000.

Although her gallery has been showing Mr. Oldenburg for years, Paula Cooper said that now seemed a good time to bring a group of his works to Basel because of the show at MoMA and one in Cologne, Germany, last year.

"Those people who have always admired Claes are rediscovering him," she said. "So are a new generation who didn't know his work until now."