

A Fair With a French Accent, Inside and Out

At FIAC, galleries set up shop in the Grand Palais, and Paris reasserts its importance as an art capital.



By **Ted Loos**

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The physical environments of art fairs tend to be utilitarian convention halls, though there are some — like the Frieze fairs in London, New York and Los Angeles, with their light-filled, architect-designed tents — that try to boost the appeal of the surroundings.

The Grand Palais in Paris, however, is a building of a different order. Built for the Exposition Universelle in 1900, the structure has a glass roof and the largest nave in Europe, which have helped to make it an architectural and civic icon. It epitomizes Beaux-Arts style.

It's one of the premier selling points — other than Paris itself in the fall, that is — for the International Contemporary Art Fair, or FIAC, taking place there Thursday through Sunday for its 46th edition.

“We're the largest user of the Grand Palais,” said Jennifer Flay, the fair's director. “We've annexed every nook and cranny we could.

“I'd love to have more galleries, and that will be the case,” she added, referring to the extensive renovation the Grand Palais will undergo, starting after next year's edition of FIAC.

For at least two years, the fair will move to a temporary venue on the Champ-de-Mars, by the Eiffel Tower. It is scheduled to move back to the Grand Palais in 2024, if the venue is ready. But even in its present form, FIAC is finding room for 199 galleries from 29 countries.

“There's more geographic diversity this year,” Ms. Flay said. “We have our first gallery from Iran, and the first one from sub-Saharan Africa, the Ivory Coast.”

She added: “This is significant for FIAC. It says we are open to the world, as one has to be today.”



The International Contemporary Art Fair, or FIAC, starts on Thursday at the Grand Palais in Paris. Marc Damage

The engine of the fair is still European and American galleries; about a quarter are from France.

Newcomers include New York's Lévy Gorvy, which Ms. Flay called "an important new arrival." The gallery will focus on Pop Art from the 1960s with works by Andy Warhol, Martial Raysse and Gerald Laing.

Trends in the fair's displays wax and wane, though Ms. Flay has noticed one that has held strong.

“Over the years, the presence of modern art has increased,” Ms. Flay said, though, she noted, “it’s getting harder for galleries to find important works.”

The booth of Galerie Gmurzynska, for example, will be devoted to the Chilean painter Roberto Matta (1911-2002), with works he completed from 1947 to 1958.

“It’s important for us to show these kind of works, given the importance of Paris in the history of modern art,” Ms. Flay said.

Dealers showing at fairs often try to capitalize on recent, concurrent or upcoming museum presentations of artists.

The New York gallery Metro Pictures, for example, will show a work by Cindy Sherman, “Untitled #602” (2019). It is part of a new photographic series by Ms. Sherman in which she portrays male characters, and it was shown in a National Portrait Gallery retrospective in London that ended in September.

One beloved figure of modern design, the architect Charlotte Perriand (1903-1999), is having the largest-ever exhibition of her work across town at the Fondation Louis Vuitton.

Galerie Patrick Seguin of Paris is devoting its booth in the Design sector of the fair — a small one with just five dealers — to Ms. Perriand, including the furniture pieces Banquette Tokyo and Etagère Asymétrique.

“I’ve watched the market for her designs rise steadily over time, growing in conjunction with the contemporary art market,” Mr. Seguin wrote in an email.

Known as a specialist in the work of the architect Jean Prouvé, a significant collaborator of Ms. Perriand’s, Mr. Seguin is also erecting a Prouvé house, “Maison Démontable (1944),” on the Place de la Concorde as part of FIAC’s outdoor program, Hors les Murs.

The distinctly French cast of FIAC is furthered by the presence of the gallery Ceysson & Bénétière, with two exhibition spaces in France and one each in Luxembourg and New York.

Its booth in the main part of the fair will feature about 20 pieces that emphasize the achievements of Conceptual artists of the 1960s and ’70s, including Noël Dolla’s “Croix” (1973).

“It was a revolutionary time,” said Loïc Garrier, director and fair manager of Ceysson & Bénétière. “The artists destroyed the old traditions of painting.”

He added that the era is a reference point for today’s contemporary artists.

“Their preoccupations are still alive,” Mr. Garrier said. “Works from 50 or 60 years ago feel relevant.”

Dealers need not have headquarters in French-speaking countries to further the Gallic vibe. Lisson Gallery — with two spaces each in London and New York, and one in Shanghai — will focus its booth on the French artists Laure Prouvost and Bernard Piffaretti.

It will also have Paris-themed pieces like Carmen Herrera’s 1953 “Links in a Chain.” The artist, based in New York and still working at 104, painted it when she lived in Paris.

“FIAC has its own atmosphere,” said Louise Hayward, a senior director at Lisson. “It’s totally unlike other fairs, and part of it comes from being in that extraordinary building.”

Ms. Hayward added: “Parisian culture just leans toward visiting and enjoying. And people have a very specific way of talking about art.”

The Hors les Murs program provides conversation fodder for anyone strolling around Paris, regardless of whether they pay 38 euros (about \$42) to enter the Grand Palais for the fair itself.

In the Jardin des Tuileries, pieces by Lois Weinberger, Katinka Bock and Jenny Holzer will be installed among some two dozen others.

Mr. Dolla's installation, "Nymphéas Post Déluge II," is meant to evoke Claude Monet's "Water Lilies" in the adjacent Musée de l'Orangerie: hundreds of multicolored umbrellas floating and bobbing in a large pool.

The marquee outdoor installation this year, in the upscale Place Vendôme, is by the 90-year-old artist Yayoi Kusama, who has had a surge in popularity over the past decade.

People flock to her "Infinity Rooms" wherever they are installed, including at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington; its 2017 retrospective of Ms. Kusama's work set attendance records.

The new piece, "Life of the Pumpkin Recites, All About the Biggest Love for the People" (2019), is a giant inflatable pumpkin, in her signature polka dots. The installation is partly a collaboration with her galleries — Victoria Miro, David Zwirner and Ota Fine Arts.

"The Place Vendôme is an historic site, and the sculpture there is always the most important outdoor project," said Glenn Scott Wright, co-director of Victoria Miro.

The gallery will also show Ms. Kusama's "Flowers That Speak All About My Heart Given to the Sky" (2019), a large painted bronze flower sculpture, in its FIAC booth.

Given the way Ms. Kusama's work attracts visitors, the galleries devote significant time to fielding requests from around the world.

"We get approached almost every day to do something with her — a public sculpture, a fashion project," Mr. Wright said. "It's endless. But she turns down 99 percent of them. It's a big deal that she said yes to this."

Art fairs are by nature cacophonous assemblages that can induce sensory overload, so a single Place Vendôme project, especially something as appealing as a giant inflatable pumpkin, can help center a visitor's experience.

Ms. Flay said that "Life of the Pumpkin" was part of a "special moment for Paris."

"She has worked in the spirit of peace and love, and that's wonderful," Ms. Flay added. "It's a big, throbbing heart from Japan."