

Nushin Elahi's London Letter

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The Frieze Art Fair in Regent's Park is a major highlight on the arts calendar in London. It's not only the rich and famous that hang out there to see nearly 200 galleries show the work of hundreds of contemporary artists. Not content with that, Frieze has now thrown its net wider to add yet another official fair, Frieze Masters, to the dozens that have spawned off this popular event. I have finally figured out why there are almost no labels at a show like the Frieze Art Fair. Aimed at collectors with more money than sense, it must be because if you can't immediately see that those dots are a Damien Hirst, then the people you hope to impress with your collection won't either, and your investment is pointless. That is also perhaps why this year's Frieze felt and looked so much like last year's.

You can tick off all the regulars. The Damien pill cabinet is at Gagosian, his butterflies at White Cube, his spots at Victoria Miro, alongside Yayoi Kusama's and a quirky new tapestry from Grayson Perry. Gagosian is not the only one with Franz West's sculptures, Tracy Emin's splayed nudes are instantly recognisable embroidered on white and Sarah Lucas showed with an Austrian gallery a wallpaper of a spindly nude pair of buttocks from behind clutching a bottle of milk. The lists go on and on. Most of the works were huge, unsurprisingly, as something small doesn't stand a chance here. Nevertheless, what excites the public so about this decade-old event is the enormous range of work and galleries that you can find here. Although Europe, Asia and America are well represented, this year was the first time an African gallery was exhibiting. On the first day the Tate snapped up a piece by rising young South African artist Nicholas Hlobo, called Balindile I - strange ghost-like forms that appear out of rolls of black rubber tubing. The smaller stalls offer glimpses of art from around the world, some interesting and stimulating, much of it colourful and a fair bit quite awful. But that's the fun of the fair – getting lost in a maze of art and suddenly realising that you've seen this one before! I find it unfortunate though that it is so difficult to learn about new artists here, although once you've braved the bored blank stare of most gallerists, they are happy to engage about whom they are showing.

Frieze Masters, the newcomer on the block, is where the hundreds of thousands turn into millions (US dollars only here). Also in Regent's Park,

but closer to Camden, it presents work made before 2000 and dating back to ancient and old masters. The show was obviously much emptier than its ten-year old counterpart, and I think Frieze is actually diluting its own impact. Even the most avid art lover has only so much tread in their stilettos. Yes, you can see a Picasso alongside a tribal mask and a medieval icon, but I do believe that the price (£35 for both shows) and size will leave Joe Public behind and then the hype around the fairs could dwindle. And let's face it, only hot air is really keeping those prices inflated. So when one smug gallerist said, the value of this work is... I was tempted to point out that price and value are not the same thing, especially these days. It's funny how you can find any trend you want to see on these shows. Critics have commented on more film than before, and performance art, but at Frieze I kept seeing countless huge blocks of colour, in particular blue. Exquisite, saturated hues of blue, so it was a particular delight when I saw a grouping of Yves Klein's Kleinbleu at Frieze Masters. Somehow it completed the circle.

The £40 000 **Turner Prize** is another excuse for controversy in the art world, although these days people are almost surprised when there is anything that could be called painting or drawing on the shortlist. No longer shown in London every year, work by the four finalists is currently on display at Tate Britain until 6 Jan 2013 and the winner will be announced live on television on 3 December.

Paul Noble is the only traditional artist among them, but although his intricate, detailed pencil drawings are painstakingly meticulous, the subject matter is curious, to say the least. Starting with a single word in the particular alphabet he has designed, Noble draws fantastical houses with no humans and strange, organic shapes, part of an enormous project of a mythical place called Nobson Newtown. Even the marble sculptures, in a strange black and white patterned stone, continue this monotone theme.

Spartacus Chetwynd is the first performance artist to be nominated for the prize, and although her work certainly espouses spontaneity, and a fresh humour, I believe that it belongs under the umbrella of a theatre rather than an art gallery. In that more rigorous setting, however, it would be totally eclipsed by other challenging and engaging works. In fact, the artist talks about the gentler environment of the art gallery, one which allows extended experimentation, but the performances I saw looked like indulgent undergraduate drama school stuff rather than innovation. All this says is that the world of art has lost touch with reality while the theatre never has. Yet Chetwynd could well win because of the sheer novelty of her art in these confines.

The other two artists are film makers. Luke Fowler works collaboratively in the art world, and has been artist in residence at the ICA this summer. He is committed to setting up platforms of creative exchange, something difficult to display. The Tate shows his photographs of musicians he works with and a feature-length film on RD Lang, which few people except psychology students will stay to watch.

The vibrant creations of Elizabeth Price are much shorter and therefore more accessible. She weaves together existing archives of text, image and sound to create a bold new work. In The Woolworths Choir of 1979 she cleverly juxtaposes sound and image to merge choral singing, church decoration and the tragic fire in a Woolworth factory in Manchester, to explosive effect.

(Captions right): Snaps from the Frieze Art Fair, Regents Park, London 2012) South African Nicolas Hlobo's work on display, other gallery stands, (Top left) a still from Paul Noble's video works on the Turner Prize

