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Brussels Shines a Spotlight on the Value of Regional Art Fairs

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"Red Garden," an oil on canvas by the Hungarian artist Attila Szucs, shown at the Independent Brussels fair. 2017 Attila Szucs/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York and Erika Deak Gallery

By Scott Reyburn

April 21, 2017

BRUSSELS — There are about 150 major art fairs around the world each year, and collectors and dealers routinely complain that there are too many. But as an [Art Basel and UBS Art Market report](#) recently pointed out, fairs generated an estimated \$12.2 billion in

recently pointed out, fairs generated an estimated \$15.5 billion in sales in 2016, about 41 percent of dealer transactions.

Top-level contemporary fairs like [Art Basel](#) in Switzerland in June and [Frieze London](#) in October have become “destination” events that attract a truly global audience, but the tier below has become ever more competitive.


This year, two regional fairs are emerging as standouts in the overcrowded global art scene: [Independent Brussels](#) and [Art Brussels](#), which both capitalize on [Belgium's depth of discerning collectors](#) for contemporary art. Thanks to low rents, the city has been a magnet for artists and galleries, prompting it to be hailed by some as a new Berlin.

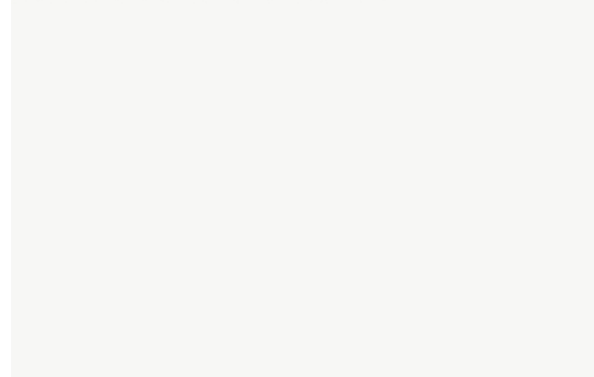
“The big collectors don’t really travel across time zones any more,” Alain Servais, a Belgian collector, said on Wednesday at the opening of Independent Brussels. “If you’re in Manhattan and can go to the [Armory and Frieze New York](#), you need a pretty good reason to go to Brussels or Turin. That’s why the regional fair makes sense.”

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This is the second year that Independent, a dealer-organized event in New York that tries to look more like an exhibition than an art fair, is holding a European edition at the Vanderborcht Building in Brussels. Eschewing the formality of aisles and booths, 70 international gallerists are presenting contemporary artworks through six floors of a stylish Art Deco former department store. Thirty are first-time exhibitors, including the Budapest gallerist Erika Deak.

Ms. Deak is showing new works by the Hungarian artists Attila Szucs, a prominent painter, and Zsafia Keresztes, an emerging sculptor.

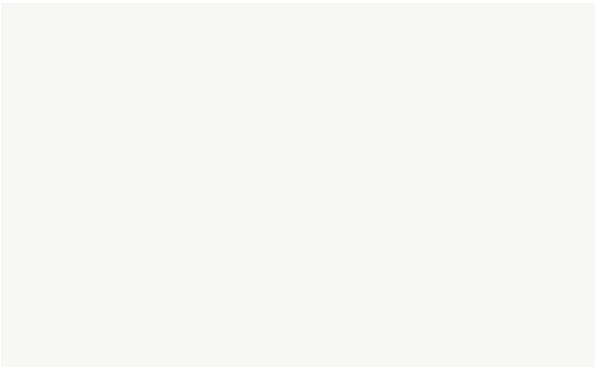
 Zsafia Keresztes's “Comfort of Self-Cannibalism,” 2017.



Zsafia Keresztes's “Comfort of Self-Cannibalism,” 2017. Zsafia Keresztes and David Biro/Erika Deak Gallery

“The artists want to be in art fairs, and I wanted to introduce them to an international audience,” Ms. Deak said. “There isn’t a strong collector base in Hungary.”

 A Tommy Simoens installation at Independent Brussels.



A Tommy Simoens installation at Independent Brussels. Isabelle Arthuis, Independent Brussels

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Independent's presence in Belgium reflects the strength of the country's collector base. So does the 35th edition of the more mainstream Art Brussels contemporary fair, which had a preview on Thursday at the Tour & Taxis customs warehouse, as well as the numerous galleries and foundations holding shows in Brussels this week.



Art Brussels at the Tour & Taxis custom warehouse.


Art Brussels at the Tour & Taxis custom warehouse. David Plas/Art Brussels

Major local collectors such as Mimi Dusselier, Bruno van Lierde and Walter Vanhaerents were spotted at Independent, as were the Russian collector Maria Baibakova and Axel Haubrok from Berlin.

Yet, as is the case at most contemporary art fairs in these uncertain times, buyers at Independent remain highly selective. Collectors balked, for example, at the asking price of 26,000 euros, or \$28,000, for Mr. Szucs's photography-inspired painting "Red Garden" — well above the artist's current auction high of \$23,670.

The New York and Brussels gallery Clearing, which also opened a 5,400 square-foot space in the Belgian capital this week, did sell a colorful 2017 pastel abstract, "Untitled," by the Los Angeles-based artist Aaron Garber-Maikovska, for \$25,000. The Approach gallery in London presented a strikingly diverse and thought-provoking group of works by the Dutch conceptual artist Germaine Kruij, who lives in Brussels. These included "Kannadi," a 2017 relief sculpture incorporating geometric metal mirrors made for

religious rituals in southern India, which found a buyer at €40,000.

 Aaron Garber-Maikovska's "Untitled," 2017.

Aaron Garber-Maikovska's "Untitled," 2017. Courtesy of the artist and C L E a R I N G, New York, Brussels

"I'm not a big fan of fairs," said Olivier Gevart, a Belgian collector who runs [Étê 78](#), a nonprofit exhibition space in the capital, at the Art Brussels opening. "They're not really a place where you can discuss art. But you can still make discoveries."

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Mr. Gevart said he prefers visiting a few of Europe's smaller regional fairs and its galleries, and Art Brussels is on his list. "It's not too big, the selection of galleries is good, and it's not too trendy," he said, adding that he estimated that there were at least 200 collectors in Belgium who spend €50,000 or more a year on serious contemporary art.

This year's edition of Art Brussels features 145 galleries, presenting a range of 20th- and 21st-century works. Predictably, collectors have gravitated toward the 30 dealers in the "Discovery" section, where the New York gallery The Hole has a solo presentation of new politically charged pastel drawings by the Los Angeles artist Eric Yahnker.

Collectively titled "Alternative Fiction," the drawings include a portrait of Barack Obama with atomic explosions reflected in his sunglasses, and a study of a white cat smoking a pipe, with the Magritte-inspired title, "This Is Not A Cat Smoking A Pipe." The latter was one of two works that quickly sold to Belgian collectors for €12,000 each.

Eric Yahnker's "This is Not A Cat Smoking A Pipe," 2017.
Courtesy of the artist and The Hole New York

Art Brussels, in contrast with Independent, also offers plenty of works by blue-chip names, albeit up to a certain price level. One big-ticket sale was a 1969 black-and-white stripe abstract by the French artist Daniel Buren, which the Brussels dealer Xavier Hufkens sold to a Belgian collector for €285,000.

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Mr. Hufkens has shown at Art Brussels for about 25 years, and he gave a dinner this week for more than 200 clients, including collectors from Japan and the United States who are trickling back to Brussels after the shock of the March 2016 [terrorist attacks](#) in the city.

The packed art fair calendar continues to evolve. On April 12, the [ABC contemporary art fair in Berlin](#) announced that it would introduce an event in that city in collaboration with Art Cologne, the world's longest-established contemporary fair, whose 51st edition opens on Wednesday. The inaugural edition of the collaboration, called Art Berlin, is scheduled to replace ABC at the Station Berlin events center from Sept. 14 to 17.

Maike Cruse, the director of Gallery Weekend Berlin, set to open April 28, will be in charge of operations at the new Art Berlin event. She noted that the nine-year-old ABC hadn't been an art fair so much as "an exhibition compiled by galleries and not primarily commercial."

She added, "We want to further develop it to attract new collectors."

But the fair will have to compete with another new event, this one in the German city of Düsseldorf. In February, Art Basel's parent company, MCH Group, bought a 25.1 percent stake in art.fair international, the organizer of a satellite event in Cologne. That fair will now be expanded and rebranded as [Art Düsseldorf](#), which will run from Nov. 16 to 19.

Welcome to the regional-art-fair merry-go-round.

