



Frieze London 2019 review - gags, tapestry and hardcore ceramic panda sex

Regent's Park, London Dazzling colour radiates throughout the art fair this year, along with the scent of ayahuasca ceremonies and satirical pokes at the pretensions - and aggressive fringes - of the art world

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Artists who think you are not good looking." "Performance for people in jogging clothes with serious expressions." "Tapered trouser reading group." No, these are not my notes from Frieze: these are captions to drawings by Bedwyr Williams, skewering art world pretension and insincerity. From curators with aggressively short fringes and witty spectacles to patronising artists on rural residencies, he sees them all.

Williams is no ingénue - he represented Wales at the Venice Biennale - but the satirical drawings he drip-fed through Instagram over the last year have a fanbase all their own. The Welshman has made it impossible to see art-world gatherings as much other than an assemblage of his painfully accurate caricatures. But now the serpent has eaten its own tail: Williams's drawings are at Frieze, the art fair at Regent's Park in London, shown by Southard Reid. Make a beeline for its booth and you'll see the fair through different eyes.

While Frieze is short on actual laughs (year on year, there is less bad plastic surgery, fewer wild costumes and a scarcity of ill-advised stilettos) the art itself tells an upbeat story. As though in riposte to dark times, colour dominates. Gagorian Gallery's huge booth sets the tone with a suite of paintings titled Helios by Sterling Ruby, a California-based artist popular with the fashion crowd. This season, it seems, is all about yellow and orange: Ruby's paintings are so bright that standing mid-booth feels less like greeting the California dawn than being stuck inside a spacecraft hurtling toward the sun. A migraine hazard it may be, but Helios certainly gets the fair off to a colourful start.



This season is about yellow and orange ... Sterling Ruby for the Gagolian Gallery at Frieze. Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock

Donna Huanca at Simon Lee makes a more calming offer. The artist usually works with performers whose naked bodies become part of what she paints. Here, she creates a mesmerising environment in which the visitors are the performers. Highly textured blue paintings, some freestanding and hung with braids, sit in a low-ceilinged white space above mounds of white sand amid a pervasive scent derived from palo santo, the fragrant wood burned during ayahuasca ceremonies.

An elegant engagement with yet more dazzling colour comes at Lisson, which has one of this year's most striking booths: a memorial to its artist Joyce Pensato, who died in June. Pensato's large, expressionistic portraits of pop-cultural characters, all painted in black on plain backgrounds, are shown between intensely coloured blocky abstract paintings by her friend Stanley Whitney. The works are beautifully balanced: apparently the display had been planned before Pensato's death but she became too unwell to complete work for it. The gallery instead borrowed paintings from private collections (none are for sale) and the result is one of the most powerful booths at Frieze.

There are bursts of colour everywhere, in fact. Strong, graphic paintings with beaded embellishment by the US artist Jeffrey Gibson pop up at both Sikkema Jenkins and Kavi Gupta. Recalling geometric textiles or printing patterns, Gibson's works carry thoughtful mottos: "You Better Let Somebody Love You" or "Make Your Own Kind of Music".



Groucho Homer by Joyce Pensato in the Lisson Gallery at Frieze London.
Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock

Lehmann Maupin painted every panel of its booth a different jewel-bright shade to show suites of photographs by Robin Rhode. The South African artist's shtick is a combination of street art and staged performance - a play of illusions in which the human body interacts with painted material blossoming across a surface. Here, he's worked with dancers whose changing positions apparently generate transforming geometric patterns panel by panel.

It is, it seems, a year for painting, and for figurative painting in particular. Among the young discoveries are 25-year-old Joy Labino, showing at Tiwani Contemporary. Inspired by a photo album showing her British Nigerian family in moments of celebration, Labino has teased out particularities and common threads, from the style of pose to combinations of patterns and groupings. Her compositions are evocative if deliberately awkward, a tone reflected in her titles: *Everything Will Be Alright* and *A Celebration of Sorts*.

There are gorgeous new paintings from established British favourites. Lubaina Himid, who won the Turner prize in 2017 and recently had a triumphant exhibition in New York, has *Traditional Three Tier Wedding Cake* at Hollybush Gardens: two black men share the canvas, each in his own universe, set apart by the reflected light picked up on their skin - one all indigo blues and lavenders, the other yellows and lime greens.

Sadie Coles HQ's booth is fronted by a complex sculptural screen by Helen Marten that feels endlessly fascinating and enigmatic. (Screens seem rather a phenomenon this year - just the thing for the collector who loves paintings but has run out of wall space?) The curated section, titled *Woven*, seems less coherent than in previous years. There is very little linking these solo displays by non Euro-American artists working with textiles and fibre, beyond that initial premise, either technically or thematically.

The late Pacita Abad's bright paintings pay homage to diverse immigrant communities in the US, capturing the energy of billboards, painted signs and busy streets. Her optimism is broadcast in the radiating *LA Liberty* (1992) a Latinx Lady Liberty in a patchworked and embellished robe, her torch beaming a multitude of colours. What thread connects this to Angela Su's disquieting anatomical pictures embroidered in human hair (beyond the fact that both artists wielded a needle) is hard to discern.



Tapestry moment ... work by Filipino artist Cian Dayrit. Photograph: Tolga Akmen/AFP via Getty Images

Once unfashionable, textile art has a big presence at the fair. As with the bright colours and tendency toward figurative painting, there is a suggestion here that we currently need comfort and reassurance. Certainly very little hi-tech new media art is being shown. Jack Shainman Gallery has ravelling wall hangings by rising Texan star Diedrick Brackens, recipient of recent awards from the Studio Museum in Harlem and at Frieze New York. PPOW have a great tapestry by Erin M Riley, whose painstaking handwoven works engage with the instant gratification of camera phone imagery: selfies, sexts, handbag spills, all the apparently ad hoc documentation of contemporary life. Reflections shows the artist's lavishly tattooed body reflected in the mirror, like a butt-centric update of Velázquez's 17th-century masterpiece Rokeby Venus.

Continuing the #MeToo mood of last year, there are fewer arty photos of beautiful naked young women, and far more works in which female artists depict sex and the body on their own terms. Star prize for erotic idiosyncrasy goes to Urara Tsuchiya, whose cute ceramic dioramas of interspecies orgies (pandas are among the favoured participants) are a London art world favourite. Given free rein at Union Pacific's booth, Tsuchiya has created a hotel room mid-dirty weekend, with ceramic bra-and-thong sets strewn all about, a minibar hanging open, complete with bottles of ceramic booze, and lampstands and bowls full of naughty couplings.

Cute ceramic panda sex? Sometimes the art world is so deliciously offbeat that even Bedwyr Williams couldn't make it up.

. Frieze London is in Regent's Park, London, 3-6 October

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The unconscionable examples of racism over the last weeks and months come as America's communities of color have been hit hardest by the coronavirus and catastrophic job losses. This is a perfect storm hitting black Americans. Meanwhile, the political leadership suggests that "when the looting starts, the shooting starts". The president who promised to end the "American carnage" is in danger of making it worse.

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