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Brussels stakes its claim as European hotspot for contemporary art

By Anny Shaw

Four art fairs opened in the Belgian city this week, including newcomer Independent Brussels and longstanding Art Brussels



Brussel's newest fair, Independent Photo: ©Isabelle Arthuis

Brussels established itself as a hotspot for contemporary art to rival Berlin or Paris this week, with the opening of four fairs including newcomer Independent Brussels, which launched to VIPs on 20 April (until 23 April). Together with those at Art Brussels, Poppositions and the Young International Art Fair, 257 galleries are exhibiting in the Belgian city this week.

Dealers and collectors were full of praise for the light and airy architecture of Independent Brussels, which is housed in the six-storey 1930s Vanderborcht building in the city's historic centre. Galleries are organised around a central atrium, which means visitors have to walk through booths to navigate the fair. Micheline Szwajcer, who opened her first gallery in Antwerp in 1980, described the space as “a work of art”.

“It's like the Guggenheim or Ikea—you are led around and forced to discover things,” says Louis-Philippe Van Eeckhoutte, the director of Brussels-based Office Baroque, one of 72 galleries invited to take part.

As with Independent in New York, the Belgian offshoot offers an alternative to more corporate art fairs. Here, blue-chip and emerging artists and galleries are exhibited side by side without hierarchy. The eclectic gallery list includes established names such as

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Maureen Paley and Barbara Gladstone, as well as art fair first-timers Stems Gallery. Prices for booths start at \$8,000.

“The idea is to move away from the trade fair towards something that’s closer to the experience of visiting galleries or museums,” says Matthew Higgs, the creative adviser for Independent and the director of the non-profit organisation White Columns.

One month after the terror attacks that claimed more than 30 lives, there was a notable absence of foreign collectors in the city, but a number of sales were reported on the first day. At the top end, David Zwirner gallery sold a steel work by Carol Bove for \$175,000 and Maureen Paley sold a Michael Krebber acrylic work for \$75,000. More business is expected over the weekend. “Apart from Basel, there’s never any rush at European fairs,” said Gerard Faggionato, a partner at Zwirner gallery.

The 34th edition of Art Brussels also got off to a positive start yesterday, 21 April, in its new location in the Tour & Taxis building. The fair has culled 50 galleries from last year, creating a tighter show with 141 dealers. “It’s smaller so the quality is much better. They’ve been tougher on the selection and you can really see it,” says the Brussels dealer Xavier Hufkens.

The move came with a price, however: the cost of booths increased by around 30% this year “to improve several areas of the fair”, says its outgoing artistic director Katerina Gregos.

A number of sales were reported on the opening day, including a bronze sculpture by Jaume Plensa, which sold for €340,000 at Galerie Lelong, and an almost sell-out stand at Tiwani Contemporary, the London gallery that specialises in African art.

Questions have been raised about whether Independent Brussels can co-exist with Art Brussels, but most say they have radically different approaches. Anne Vierstraete, the managing director of the older fair, confirmed that organisers stipulated that its participating dealers only exhibit at Art Brussels to “avoid doubling up”. But she welcomed Independent Brussels to the city. “The contemporary art scene is altogether evolving here,” Vierstraete says.

The New York dealer Elizabeth Dee, who co-founded Independent in Manhattan in 2010 with Darren Flook, says the new fair is about “building bridges to the existing scene” and that the “incredible community” of collectors and dealers in Brussels is welcoming the changes.

So is Brussels the new Berlin? The local collector Benedikt van der Vorst thinks so. “The arrival of Independent Brussels confirms the importance of the city in today’s contemporary art world. Together with Art Brussels, the fairs form a great ambassador for art in Belgium.”

- *Art Brussels, Tour & Taxis, until 24 April*
- *Independent Brussels, Vanderborcht building, until 23 April*