

Collecting: Frieze Week 2017

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Art fair trend: storytelling

Dealers and auction houses are using narrative to exhibit works ever more creatively



A mock-up of Hauser & Wirth's booth at Frieze London © Damian Griffiths

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There is even more than the usual creative spirit in the London air. Luxembourg & Dayan, no stranger to inventive booths, is rebuilding the home of Italian artist Enrico Baj, including a scruffy sofa shipped from the outskirts of Milan to Regent's Park for its Frieze Masters booth. Gagosian gallery is turning its Masters booth into a version of a room at the 1989 *Bilderstreit* exhibition in Cologne's Ludwig Museum for the unlikely pairing of Georg Baselitz and Roy Lichtenstein, including Lichtenstein's "Paintings: Oriental Still Life" (1984), which was in the original show. Waddington Custot plans to recreate the living space and studio of British Pop artist Peter Blake.

"Hanging a bunch of paintings on a wall is not enough, we want to tell a story," says Stefan Ratibor, director of Gagosian. This underlines the trend in many art fairs: the showcase is sometimes almost as important as the sales.

Art dealers aren't the only ones telling tales. Last month, Christie's recreated a scholar's studio for 30 items, ranging from ink paintings to 300-year old bonsais, to give context to its First Open

auction in Shanghai. This Friday, Sotheby's hosts a themed Bauhaus auction for which the plan is to recreate a trademark space in its London saleroom.



Enrico Baj's home, to be recreated by Luxembourg & Dayan © Archivo Baj, Vergiate, 2017/Filippo Armellin

Such environments become the stage sets for human-interest stories that capture today's imaginations, whether the impoverished painter in an unkempt studio, the exhibition that once

shocked, or the rediscovered masterpiece.

“Our job is to encourage interest in works. That could be their art history, or an artist’s technique, or — increasingly — it’s the narrative,” says Marc Sands, Christie’s chief marketing officer. And luckily, there is plenty to tell. As Sands puts it, “You don’t have to tip meaning into art, its stories can be endless.”

Storytelling like this is about hooking in new audiences and then keeping them, not a given in an easily-distracted age. It can appear curiously uncommercial — fashion executives talk about emphasising the journey over the product — but of course the end-game is for one to lead to the other. Fairs are an ideal place to grab such attention. Ratibor points out that, “Like it or not, more people will see our presentation at Frieze than in a gallery show.”

For lesser-known artists, a back-story booth can add some necessary colour and context. “We have thought of a way of explaining [Enrico Baj] to the public, to create a certain aura, to get under his skin, and we can back it up with great works of art,” Luxembourg says.

Unearthing the background to a work or an artist has proved particularly effective in Asia, according to Jussi Pylkkänen, Christie’s global president, citing the impact it has had in the Impressionist and Modern fields in particular. “Human experience is a universal language,” he says.





Roy Lichtenstein's 'Gray Head' (1986) at Gagosian, Frieze Masters © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein

Storytelling also lends itself to technology, which vastly increases the potential audience for art. One story can be told through several channels, and the auction houses are increasingly using videos, viewable via various devices (Christie's now has a "Stories" section on its website), while their executives are dab hands at writing stories for their Instagram feeds.

Most gallerists have yet to adopt such all-encompassing campaigns, but they are certainly experimenting with developments, a trend that fair directors are encouraging. "We are in the content business, as art fair producers, and we must embrace that," said Benjamin Genocchio, director of New York's Armory Show, in a recent speech at the FNB Johannesburg art fair.

Despite a repository of true stories, dealers and artists also enjoy toying with the trend: Damien Hirst is currently filling two major museums in Venice with his sculptures from a fictional shipwreck. For Frieze London, Hauser & Wirth has put considerable effort into inventing a Bronze Age room from a UK regional museum, complete with fire extinguishers and ageing paintwork, in collaboration with classics professor Mary Beard. Around half the works are for sale (including pieces by Louise Bourgeois and Paul McCarthy), a quarter are loans from other collections, while the rest — objects such as brooches, daggers and coins bought from eBay — explore how visual context affects our assessment of objects.

"There's a slight lunacy to the project," says Neil Wenman, director of Hauser & Wirth.

"Museums have lent works to go into our 'museum', which is in fact in the middle of an art fair."

Wenman says their story, about spaces that are cared for but often overlooked, wasn't conceived to make sales, but that "being creative should grab more attention". It also breaks the monotony, for a gallery's staff as well as art fair visitors. "It's 10 times the work, but more than 10 times as enjoyable," Wenman says. "Ultimately, people don't visit fairs to be preached at, they go to be entertained," he adds.

Photographs: Damian Griffiths; Archivo Baj, Vergiate, 2017/Filippo Armellini; Estate of Roy Lichtenstein