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Quality? There's the Rub

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Miami Beach, Fla.

What a difference a year makes. Previously, the greatest spectacle on offer at Miami Art Basel was not so much the art as the rush, when the main fair opened its doors, of international millionaires jostling to get the big-name artworks first. If you fell behind by a matter of minutes, seconds even, that other fellow from Berlin or Dubai or his private buyer would beat you to the Gagosian booth, snapping up the Damien Hirsts. If the works weren't sold before the opening, that is.

But today, with the world economy in dire straits, attendees milling at the Convention Center gates for the early Wednesday collectors opening at midday ambled nonchalantly into the hall, paused at the three portraits of Barack Obama by different artists at different galleries occupying prime entry-area space, and wafted toward their respective goals as if accidentally.

Was anybody buying, the guests wanted to know, and if so at what price? Was the market holding up? What would last year's purchase be worth now? Everyone seemed to be watching everyone else.

And how were the dealers handling it? According to the London-born New York gallerist Paul Kasmin, he had already anticipated the mood and brought along less pricey pieces. Still, even by the third day, people were being cautious: One client who had shelled out \$1.2 million last year on works by Claude Lorraine, the veteran French metal-sculptor, had spent only \$300,000 this year.

The director of a foreign art fair told me that this year "collectors were buying, not speculators." A French hedge-fund manager said that his friends normally didn't buy on the second day because only the losers were left on the walls. But this year they waited, he said, to see how far prices would soften as the days passed. As always in bad times, there was talk of a "flight to quality."

Quality? There's the rub. The cognoscenti intoned knowingly that art with "real value" would still be in demand, but nobody could identify what that meant. At Gagosian, a "joke painting" by overcelebrated pop-artist Richard Prince was priced at \$1.5 million. Against a blue background, it featured a paragraph-long text in small yellow letters about a traveling salesman who, when his car broke down, asked a farmer for help; instead the farmer "shot the salesman in the head." The staff member told me that the blue of the background was particularly beautiful. One wondered if that gave it real value.

The most oft-cited, and quickest, sale of a substantial piece occurred at the Sies & Höke gallery of Düsseldorf, Germany, within an hour of opening time. The work -

- a 23-ton beautifully engraved bronze bell from 1929, deprived of its clapper and given the name "For Whom . . ." -- was transported from Belgium and priced at \$250,000. The saleswoman refused to tell me what it cost to bring it stateside nor how much it actually sold for. The purchaser would install it in a Miami park, she said. I suspect that the buyer knew to offer a lot less than asking price for a piece that would cost a fortune to ship back. But the saleswoman did say that the huge silent bell, which swung above our heads, "raised issues concerning life and death."

One heard the same ponderous speechifying from desperate sales staffers and "expert" tour guides throughout the fair. A group of elderly Midwesterners was told that Damien Hirst's cabinet full of cigarette stubs was about "life and death and how we choose to kill ourselves." The piece was priced rather cheaply, as his works go, at \$750,000. The guide gleefully related how a collector had accidentally broken just such a piece and Hirst had quickly worked up another for him within a week. So much for painstaking craftsmanship.

This year, as in past years, the highest standards of art not straining for iconic status and unvarnished by hype were to be found away from the Convention Center. The Pulse fair and the new Art Asia fair abounded with artworks of beauty and substance -- not surprising, perhaps, as Pulse features untrendy top galleries not in the main fair and Art Asia offers the distillation of an entire continent's contemporary art.

In the latter, the gallery of the fair's founder Ethan Cohen featured a superlative 1978 work by Manhattan-based Japanese realist painter Naoto Nakagawa titled "Still Life With Bird," a painting that instantly restored one's faith in art. From the Red Gate gallery in Beijing came splendid inventions by sculptor Li Xiaofeng of lissome costume shapes made out of Ming Era pottery-shards. Istanbul's Pi Artworks gallery featured a haunting and original work of painted sheets of tulle fabric layered into a kind of 3-D effect by Turkish artist Irfan Onurmen.

At Pulse, the baroquely tropical paintings of British artist Andy Harper at London's One in the Other gallery delighted the eye with their beauty and mystery. In a similar vein, Julie Hefferman's canvases at New York's PPOW gallery with their arboreal lushness could hold one's gaze for hours. In these and like works, there was nothing to brutalize, trivialize or distort the beholder's senses, and nothing that needed a tide of accompanying artspeak to stand on its own. As the hubris of the art world shrinks, works like these will surely come into their own and we will all be the saner for it.

Mr. Kaylan writes about culture for the Journal.

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