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Artists back the digital route

Digital boosts physical at London gallery; Contemporary Art Society opens summer space; Art Basel brings in the Hong Kong crowds; Baldessari estate chooses Sprüth Magers; gothic casket makes auction record in Scotland

A 16th-century French casket that sold for £12m at Lyon & Turnbull © Alex Robson

Melanie Gerlis 6 HOURS AGO

The Covid-19 pandemic has dramatically disrupted the business of selling art but digital platforms and physical galleries are not mutually exclusive, finds Helen Waters, senior director at London's Cristea Roberts Gallery. Instagram was the inspiration for her latest show of four female artists: Charlotte Keates, Karen Lederer, Zsofia Schweger and Polly Shindler (*Just what is it . . .?*, until June 19).

'Sweet Frangipani and Essence' by Charlotte Keates (2020)

"I had only come across the work of one artist [Schweger] in real life before," Waters says. Despite making her discoveries through social media, she emphasises the importance of the real-life show. "Instagram has been a fantastic tool for artists, particularly during the past year. But they want [physical] exhibitions and we can reach a whole new collector base this way. Plus, there are so many artists on Instagram, you really need to put in the hours," Waters says. All four artists in her show explore the theme of "home", a topic that has proved more pertinent since the pandemic struck (price range £1,120-£13,650).

'Orange Crush' by Karen Lederer (2019)

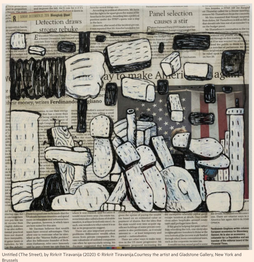
The exhibition opened as a separate report, conducted by the online marketplace Artfinder, revealed that the majority (61 per cent) of its 6,000 artists surveyed now find digital platforms, including social media, more important for sharing and selling their work than galleries. Artist James Earley, a BP Portrait Award nominee, says that 90 per cent of his income now comes from online sales, a reversal of the pre-pandemic trend. "Galleries still have a role but they need to offer a more welcoming pathway to new buyers. The internet mitigates intimidation," Earley says.

London's Contemporary Art Society (CAS), a charity that buys works to donate to UK museums, is to raise funds through a pop-up selling exhibition in Mayfair. The ground-floor, 1,000 sq ft gallery at 16 Mount Street opens on June 4, to coincide with the first London Gallery Weekend. The space has been offered for free by the collecting couple Muriel and Freddy Salem, the latter a property and logistics investor. "The last 18 months have given us all the opportunity to consider new ways of supporting our institutions," Muriel Salem says in a statement.

'Madame Blavatsky' by Goshka Macuga (2020) © Conradin Frei

On view will be works on consignment from galleries such as Lisson Gallery, Thaddaeus Ropac and Kate MacGarry. Expected artists include Gillian Wearing, Lubaina Himid and Goshka Macuga, who this week was one of six nominees for London's Fourth Plinth commission for Trafalgar Square. Prices currently range from £900 to £90,000 and the artists will keep their usual cut of sales, confirms Caroline Douglas, director of CAS — "it is important that this stays untouched" — while a percentage from their gallery commission will go to the charity. The exhibition space runs until the end of August.

"It's the first time in two years that I've seen so many people together in Hong Kong." So says local collector Yan Du of this year's experimental Art Basel Hong Kong fair, held last week (May 21-23). The event was far from normal, with only 48 gallerists showing in person and a further 56 who had supplied art for their booths but engaged remotely with the fair. An Online Viewing Room and other digital initiatives, including a daily broadcast, supplemented the real-life activity.



Untitled (The Street), by Rirkrit Tiravanija (2020) © Rirkrit Tiravanija/Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

The mash-up was worth it, in Du's opinion. "Size doesn't matter. If anything it was better to spend more quality time and see more art from Asia," she says. "It was amazing to see works again, see friends and meet people. Making purchases is better when there is more emotional interaction," Du adds. She picked up new works including one of Rirkrit Tiravanija's reappropriated Philip Guston paintings — *untitled 2020 (The Street, 1970)* from Gladstone Gallery, where the artist's works ranged from $25,000-$200,000 — and Xie Molin's *Suspending Blade 21.3.23* (2021, Beijing Commune gallery).

Art Basel also reveals the 94 galleries that will participate in its next standalone online viewing room, *OVR Portals* (June 16-19). This includes some first-time Art Basel participants such as London's Addis Fine Art, Galeria Nora Fisch from Buenos Aires and Gallery Vacancy from Shanghai.

Sprüth Magers gallery now globally represents the estate of the influential conceptual artist John Baldessari, who died in early 2020. The gallery opens a show of his last series of works, *The Space Between* (2019), at its Los Angeles space next month (June 12-September 11).

© The Estate of John Baldessari. Courtesy Sprüth Magers. Photo: Joshua White

© The Estate of John Baldessari. Courtesy Sprüth Magers. Photo: Joshua White

Baldessari has "in many ways defined the gallery" since it opened in Cologne in 1983, says co-founder Philomene Magers. "He was there pretty much through my whole career and always my go-to person to talk about art," she says. Baldessari, who was based in California, was instrumental in the gallery's opening on LA's Wilshire Boulevard in 2016 as well as helping to find the gallery's quirky Grafton Street space in London, Magers says. "Now, to be entrusted with his legacy is so good, so emotional," she adds. Baldessari's last series of 30 works were made with the LA gallery in mind and have yet to be shown; they will be priced at about $400,000 each.

The artist's estate belongs to his two children who continue to work with his long-time galleries Mai 36 in Zurich and Greta Meert in Brussels. The Estate no longer works with Marian Goodman, who previously represented the artist.

And finally . . . . Congratulations to Lyon & Turnbull. The Edinburgh auctioneers broke the record for the highest public price in Scotland with a 14th-century French casket that sold for £1.2m on May 20 (£1.5m with fees, estimate £30,000-£50,000). The ivory treasure knocked a rare bottle of 1926 Macallan whisky off the top spot: this went for £1m at a specialist auctioneer in Perth earlier this year. Lyon & Turnbull's 11cm-high ivory coffret, dated to around 1330 in Paris, is one of only nine known and complete secular caskets, according to the auction house, and came from Tornaveen House, Aberdeenshire. Its low-relief panels depict the legendary Celtic love story of Tristan and Isolde, and the Arthurian quest for the Holy Grail.

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