

SEANKELLY

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Battle of the art fairs: Frieze New York feels the pinch as Tefaf gains ground



Frieze New York © Marco Scozzaro 2014

New York's springtime climate is fickle. This could be said as much for its weather as it could its art market. That is a lesson Frieze has learned the hard way as speculation around the future of its New York fair, the eighth edition of which opens on 2 May, continues to swirl, especially since the arrival of Tefaf New York Spring in 2017, which is held concurrently.

After a few rough years, beset by flooding in 2017 and a ventilation breakdown in the midst of a heatwave in 2018, Frieze New York's exhibitor list is down from 190 in 2018 to 180 this year when it was first announced.

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Indeed, the Randall's Island location of Frieze New York, accessible only by car, ferry ride or multiple transfers between subways and buses—a practice even the most intrepid New Yorkers abhor—has been a point of contention for years, leading many to claim it is a "one-day fair" since few visitors make the journey more than once. Some dealers still think it is worth the trek, such as Sean Kelly, who participates in both Frieze and Tefaf this May.

"I want to support any New York fair—the diversity they offer is important in a city like this that serves as a huge motor in the marketplace," Kelly says, adding that he believes Frieze offers a lot of visibility for younger artists, which is why he will

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feature highlights from his contemporary programme there while showing a Laurent Grasso-curated selection of works dating as far back as an 1867 Manet drawing at Tefaf.

Kelly acknowledges, however, that the location and tent structure has worked against Frieze. “To be fair to it, Frieze has suffered everything but a plague of locusts in the last few years here,” he says, noting that many were left irreconcilably disgruntled after last year’s aircon breakdown. Frieze offered its exhibitors a partial refund of 10% after a number of dealers complained that the tent temperatures—which registered above 30C by some accounts—affected their sales. Chicago-based dealer Shane Campbell even filed a class-action lawsuit against the fair group claiming gross negligence, a case which remains open, active and contested by Frieze in the New York courts. While Kelly says he does not know of plans for the fair to move, he says he wouldn’t be surprised if it did.

Indeed, when the inaugural edition of Frieze Los Angeles was announced last year, many suspected the group might be foregoing its New York fair. The general success of the first LA iteration in February has further fueled these whispers, though a spokesman for the fair has said there are currently no plans to leave New York. Exhibitors and visitors at Frieze LA praised its central location at Paramount Studios and smaller size—at 70 booths, it was under half the size of its New York and London editions.

The smaller scale of Tefaf New York appeals, too—at 90 exhibitors, Rech says its “intimate” scale “allows collectors to spend time and engage with the works.” Indeed, nearly all of the dealers contacted said Tefaf’s smaller size was a major draw.

... Overall, however, the preference for smaller fairs is palpable and Sean Kelly points to the activities of Magnus Renfrew: “He has now created two boutique art fairs in Taipei and Singapore, with around 80 exhibitors. We did Taipei and it was very successful for us—the same with fairs of the same size here like ADAA’s The Art Show and now Tefaf. It’s a good model for the future.”