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'Art Fairs Bring Me the Whole World'

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Ahead of Paris+ by Art Basel, collectors discussed what attracts them to top art fairs, in person and online — and shared some tips for beginners.



The art collector Fusun Eczacibasi stands with works by Ai Wei Wei ("He Xie") and Jonas Burgert ("Deed Marked"). Ali Kabas

When Paris+ by Art Basel, a new edition of the well-known art fair, goes on view this week, it will feature more than 150 galleries from around the world. The venue, the Grand Palais Éphémère, is a temporary one, in use until the Grand Palais reopens after a major overhaul.

The debut event will feature a special section for solo artist presentations from emerging galleries and a special program called Sites, which places public artworks across Paris.

But without collectors, Paris+ would lack its vital fuel.

Here are some of the people who make art fairs possible, talking about how they build their collections and how they navigate the landscape of dealers and artworks at events like Paris+.

Fusun Eczacibasi

The Turkish philanthropist Fusun Eczacibasi — a co-founder of [SAHA](#), a nonprofit organization supporting contemporary art production in Turkey — is a longtime patron of Art Basel's original fair in Basel, Switzerland, and, given her personal interest in collecting, she plans to attend the Paris+ fair.

But she has a very specific strategy. Call it the slow-burn approach. Ms. Eczacibasi considers her time at the fair research and does not necessarily buy anything on the spot, as some do.

“I’m not a hungry person to buy,” Ms. Eczacibasi said. “If I see a piece that will enrich the dialogue, that’s different.”

Over the years, she has ended up buying many works, split between her base in Istanbul and a home in New York City. She collects with her husband, Faruk Eczacibasi, the vice chairman of the industrial [conglomerate](#) that bears his family’s name.

“Our contemporary collections are different in each city,” Ms. Eczacibasi said. “In Istanbul, we have more space, and it ranges from sculpture to video, painting and photography. But it’s more figurative. The human figure runs through the collection strongly.”

In New York, by contrast, her artworks are more “geometric,” she said.

At fairs, Ms. Eczacibasi does not appreciate the hard sell.

“In the past, I’ve seen these people jumping over each other to buy,” she said. “I hate that. I want to take my time. My husband and I can often think of more reasons why *not* to buy something.”

Of course, such restraint is easier once one already has an ample trove in place. In general, the couple will not buy in depth from a single artist, though there have been exceptions, including the work of the German painter Jonas Burgert.

Dealers, take note: Ms. Eczacibasi does not particularly care about the art world’s status markers, either.

“There’s an attitude of some galleries that I don’t like,” she said. “They tell me this artist is going to have a show at this museum, or they have been bought by this other collector. Those things are so irrelevant.”

She added: “I don’t care if it’s in a museum or not. If I like it, I want to learn more about the art and the artist.”

Ultimately, it is the atmosphere, both social and artistic, that draws Ms. Eczacibasi.

“I want to see new things and see my friends at a fair,” she said. “It’s a nice time to be together and breathe art. Art fairs bring me the whole world.”



Pamela Kramlich and her husband, the venture capitalist Richard Kramlich, sit in their home in front of a Richard Mosse video, "The Enclave." Ryan Young for The New York Times

Pamela Kramlich

With her husband, the venture capitalist Richard Kramlich, Pamela Kramlich has amassed one of the world's most significant collections of so-called time-based art — those that have duration as a dimension — including videos, films and audio works.

The [Kramlich Collection](#) also features works in a diverse array of more traditional media, including painting and sculpture; their first purchase as a couple was a work on paper by Claes Oldenburg. But the focus on time-based pieces came soon after, in 1987, when they purchased the video “The Way Things Go” by Peter Fischli and David Weiss, made that same year.

At first, when few were specializing in the field, it was a lonely quest. “I never thought I would be the only one doing something for a long time,” said Ms. Kramlich, a trustee of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

If the seriousness of their mission was not clear from the collection of hundreds of artworks, the couple also hired the Pritzker Prize-winning architectural firm Herzog & de Meuron to build them a large home in the Napa Valley expressly designed to screen videos.

But even in their San Francisco home, “We turn things on,” Ms. Kramlich said. “We live with this artwork in a very traditional setting, too.”

In a world where, in her words, “there’s too much darn art to look at,” Ms. Kramlich advises a tailored search. “The hardest thing for a collector in terms of building a collection of importance is finding a focus,” she said. “You can’t look at everything.”

Fairs, and especially editions of Art Basel, which the Kramliches attend frequently, are a place to “train your eye,” she said.

Ms. Kramlich’s strategy is, unsurprisingly, to start with her trusted contacts.

“I have particular galleries that I favor, and I go to those first,” she said, citing some of the longest-operating female dealers in New York: Marian Goodman, Barbara Gladstone and Paula Cooper. The Kramliches own all the films by Matthew Barney, an artist on Ms. Gladstone’s roster.

But they are also branching out, working with the London-based dealer Pilar Corrias, among others.

Because of the mechanics of time-based work, it can degrade. “In our field we have to take care of things,” Ms. Kramlich said. “It’s equipment and a lot of maintenance.” The couple also founded the New Art Trust, which funds research into the display, conservation and storage of media artworks.

So she resists the urge to buy on a whim. “We try to pick carefully,” she said. “I want to be sure I have very strong works, since I have to be dedicated for the rest of my life to make sure they are protected.”



Eric Johnson, left, and Rob Thomas of Minot, N.D., stand in their living room with art they have collected, including the Emily Ludwig painting “Friends and Family,” behind them. Dan Koeck for The New York Times

Eric Johnson and Rob Thomas

Eric Johnson and Rob Thomas live in Minot, N.D., far removed from the art capitals of the world. The married couple have made their home climate part of their identity, as seen in the name of their Instagram account: @theicygays.

That means these collectors, who focus on the work of female and queer artists, are the perfect art fair clients.

“We’re very remote,” said Mr. Thomas, an [ENT surgeon](#) with Minot’s Trinity Health. “We can’t really see a lot of this work in person.”

Frequently, their initial discovery of artists comes online. So a gathering of dozens or hundreds of dealers who are showing thousands of varied artworks is the perfect next step.

“Fairs allow us to translate PDFs into real life,” said Mr. Johnson, an adjunct instructor of political science for Virginia Commonwealth University.

Mr. Thomas added, “Our strategy is to go into a fair saying, ‘These are some artists that we’re excited about, let’s make a beeline for them and see if they’re as meaningful and as exciting as we think.’”

Their initial interest in art is relatively recent, compared with some collectors. In 2013, the couple went to San Francisco to marry, and the trip brought them to a David Hockney show at the de Young Museum there.

As Mr. Thomas recalled, “We said, ‘Oh, *this* is what people get excited about when they talk about getting excited about art.’”

Their collecting began in earnest, and a few years later they became devotees of art fairs, including the Armory Show, the Spring/Break Art Show in both New York and Los Angeles, Frieze New York, and Art Basel Miami Beach.

Their fair purchases are a significant part of their trove, which now numbers more than 125 works, including “The Wailing” (2021) by Cindy Ji Hye Kim and “Dirt God” (2020) by Kyle Dunn. They also own works by Robin F. Williams and Douglas Rieger.

They did not set out to focus on certain kinds of makers. “We just respond to certain things,” Mr. Thomas said. “We found that almost invariably, the artist turns out to be female-identifying or queer.”

Their collection has gained enough steam that institutions have taken notice: The [Plains Art Museum](#) in Fargo, N.D., plans to show some of the couple’s works in 2024.

Although they cannot attend Paris+ by Art Basel this week, they intend to use the fair's [Online Viewing Rooms](#). And when it comes to navigating the next in-person event, they have tips for anyone who needs them.

“Fair fatigue is real,” Mr. Thomas said. “So do some research and have a plan. And if you don’t know where to go, go to the emerging-artists section and go check that out. It’ll usually be very exciting.”