

A Thriftier Lot Comes to Basel This Year , Carol Vogel

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BASEL, Switzerland — There was a commotion on the second floor of Art Basel shortly after the fair opened here on Tuesday. Crowds gathered around a darkened alcove, listening with rapt attention to Pharrell Williams.

This 36-year-old recording artist and producer wasn't talking music, nor was he discussing his personal art collection, which includes paintings by Andy Warhol and Takashi Murakami. Rather, Mr. Williams, wearing a red-checked gingham shirt, a brown fedora and baggy blue jeans, was explaining a group of objects that had been carefully arranged in the open mouth of a whimsical fiberglass monster.

"They're the things in life that get overlooked," Mr. Williams said. These particular things — a miniature ketchup bottle, a can of Pepsi, a pair of sneakers, a cupcake, a condom, a bag of Doritos and a bottle of Johnson & Johnson baby lotion — were impeccably made in various types of gold and encrusted with 26,000 inlaid diamonds, rubies, sapphires and emeralds.

"The taste of a cupcake is worth more than diamonds," Mr. Williams went on, offering an interpretation of the sculpture, "The Simple Things," on which he collaborated with Mr. Murakami.

Within 30 minutes of the fair's opening, four people were fighting to buy the \$2 million piece. It ended up being purchased jointly by two collectors, one who lives in Paris and the other in Los Angeles. "They're friends and they intend to share it," said Emmanuel Perrotin, the Paris dealer in whose booth the sculpture was for sale.

Even the kind of big spenders who compete to snap up flashy, trendy artworks were being financially conservative this year. "The Simple Things" was one of the only examples of flash on view at Art Basel — and one of the only big-ticket works to sell quickly. The fair, which runs through Sunday, could best be described as a risk-free event. Rather than a place for collectors to discover new talent, which Art Basel used to be in flush times, the cavernous exhibition hall has been transformed into a shopping mall for blue-chip names in Modern and contemporary art. And when collectors asked for a price, the answer usually included the word "negotiable."

"It's definitely more conservative," said Lucy Mitchell-Innes, a New York dealer. "People are gravitating toward older art."

They also aren't rushing to write checks. "It's no longer people running in and saying, 'I'll take it,'" Norman Braman, a Miami collector, said. "Everyone is looking for value."

Dealers' expectations had been so low that by the end of the first day many were visibly relieved that some business was actually being done. "It's been a year since I've seen this level of confidence," said Marianne Boesky, a New York dealer, adding that she had sold works by artists like Barnaby Furnas, Robert Elfgren and Donald Moffett by the end of Tuesday. "The old-school collectors are back."

Among the visitors were high-profile figures like Eli Broad, the Los Angeles financier; Mitchell P. Rales, the Washington philanthropist; the television producer Douglas Cramer; Roman A. Abramovich, the Russian billionaire. Museum curators came too, including Gary Tinterow from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Kathy Halbreich from the Museum of Modern Art and Paul Schimmel from the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

There was even a celebrity sighting. The actor Brad Pitt, wearing aviator sunglasses, was spotted with Alan Hergott, a Los Angeles entertainment lawyer. Mr. Pitt, after conferring with Mr. Schimmel and Mr. Broad, bought "Etappe," a 1998 canvas by the German artist Neo Rauch, who had an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art two years ago. The painting, which depicts a surreal racetrack scene, was front and center at the booth of David Zwirner, a New York dealer with a gallery in Chelsea. Mr. Zwirner confirmed that Mr. Pitt had bought the painting, but declined to give the price, other than to say it was slightly less than \$1 million.

Many other booths here were filled with the work of artists who have had museum shows recently — or, in some cases, who had generated a lot of buzz just last week from their participation in the just-opened Venice Biennale, which a good number of the crowd at Basel had attended.

The New York gallery Sperone Westwater was showing Bruce Nauman, the artist representing the United States in Venice this year. One of the first images visitors saw in its booth was "Good Boy Bad Boy," a classic two-screen video piece from 1985, which was displayed alongside a selection of the artist's drawings from the 1970s.

Also for sale, at the booth of the New York gallery Matthew Marks, was a white plaster wall relief from 2008 by Charles Ray, whose outdoor sculpture of a boy holding a frog created a sensation when it was unveiled last week at the tip of the Punta della Dogana, the customs house in Venice that has been turned into an art space by the luxury goods magnate François Pinault.

Work by the Conceptual artist John Baldessari, who transformed the facade of one of the most prominent buildings at the Biennale into a Los Angeles seascape, was shown here too. In one corner of the booth of Marian Goodman, his New York dealer, was a large white sofa in the shape of an ear, flanked by a pair of nose-shaped vases sprouting flowers, a signature image of the artist.

Pieces by several especially popular artists seemed to be everywhere. Canvases by Martin Kippenberger, the German painter whose show at the Museum of Modern Art closed last month, could be spotted at the booths of Metro Pictures and Per Skarstedt, two New York dealers, and Thomas Ammann Fine Art from Zurich, among others. Sculptures and paintings by Alberto Giacometti were visible all over the hall, playing off the hugely attended exhibition now at the Beyeler Foundation near here.

Not everything was made by a household name. But even among the up-and-comers, it was particularly those artists whom insiders have been following closely whose works were selling — in some cases selling fast. "Dymaxion Family" (2009) — four vertical wood boxes filled with skeleton-like assemblages fashioned from wood and metal — by the artist Matthew Day Jackson sold the first day for an undisclosed amount to Philippe Ségalot, a private New York dealer, who bought it for a European collector.

Mr. Ségalot has been a big buyer here before, but this year seemed not to be having quite as much fun as he used to. Though he has never confirmed — or denied — it, he has been widely rumored to have hired a professional makeup artist each of the last three years to fly to Basel and turn him into someone else, enabling Mr. Ségalot to sneak into the fair unnoticed before it opened. Once inside, the story goes, he would then reserve the best pieces for his clients before anyone else could even get a peek at them.

One year he was said to have been bald and wearing a pair of thick glasses; another time he was reported to have had spiky platinum blond hair and bright blue eyes. Last year he was supposed to be dressed in grunge, head to toe, wearing long, greasy locks.

This year Mr. Ségalot, dressed as himself, came to the opening along with everyone else.

"In this market," he said, "there is no need to hurry."