

ARTFORUM

DIARY

YES, CONFIRMED, IT'S HAUNTED

The ghosts of LA past, present, and future at Frieze Week LA 2025

By Diva Corp | March 13, 2025



Diva Corp Mag in the Roosevelt pool. All photos: the author.

IT'S FRIEZE WEEK 2025. The fires were more than a month ago, and rumors were that the fairs considered canceling. Performative hand-wringing aside, they were always going to happen, and everyone's eager to see the city resurrected. So it begins.

When I land at LAX Tuesday night, the city's already screaming. It's the first thing I hear. "The city's already screaming," my friend Sloane Smith¹ says, when she picks me up. I don't really care to ask what she means. Screaming. I don't want to know. I'm strung out after a long flight home. My head hurts from Delta's well tequila. I have a stain on my shirt

that I cannot hide. Please, no screaming.

“We’re going straight to the Getty party, by the way,” she says, merging onto the freeway.
“So you’d better change.”

I tell her to fill me in on what happened while I was gone. This is important: The weekend prior to Frieze is telling of the overall temperament of what will follow. Everyone who matters is already in town, and everyone’s out. Even if they’re stressed, they’re out. Especially if they’re stressed. You can gauge nerves and confidence; you can get a sense of the narrative.

“Screaming,” Sloane says. “That’s it. That’s going to be the whole thing, all week.”

“Like, panic?”

“No. Like, they’re forcing it. You know what they’ll say: What a successful week! On the heels of the fires. . . . How resilient we truly are! It’s already happening. You’ll see.”

Sloane references some shows from the weekend. Michelle Uckotter at Matthew Brown, where smoking inside was encouraged; Victor Barragán at Carlye Packer, which felt like a queered pantomime of an ISIS video; and Jon Rafman at Sprueth Magers, where actual fabric was ostensibly used to represent the “fabric” of everyday life.

“Forced, forced, forced,” Sloane says. We come off the freeway and stop at a red light.

I think and then mention Disneyland. Yes, cringe, but no matter how forced, every time I go, I willingly devour the narrative.

. . . because why not just play along?

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THOUGH OTHER PEOPLE walk, we’re driven up to the Getty compound (the residence, this year, not the museum) in a golf cart shaped like a Humvee. Sloane volunteered for it. My friend Caine Brown2 is with us, too. It’s crisp and there’s fog, and that’s nice, but I still feel like a bit player in a humiliation ritual for the rich, getting chauffeured around in this miniature war toy.

On the way up, Caine says he knows so-and-so, who’s friends with someone who’s friends with someone who knows Balthazar, who owns the house. Balthazar is the great-grandson

of J. Paul Getty, Caine says, “like oil Getty, not just the museum,” and I give him a look because one doesn’t talk about such things. We get out of the small tank. He asks, “What’s wrong?” and I say, “Nothing” and shrug, and we follow the group to the door.

Inside, it’s crowded. It is, after all—I think—the Frieze kickoff party. Sloane says she went to the Deitch party the night prior, which they billed as the kickoff party, but that one was, in Sloane’s words, “without fun.” She insists this would not be that, and scurries off to make sure of it. As she does, I slip away from Caine. I head straight for the plate of cigarettes arranged neatly at the center of the room, then to the bar for champagne, then to the patio.



Cigarettes on a plate.

Outside, I know very few, and that’s fine. I’m here on assignment, after all, to discover the truth about Frieze week for Artforum. Instead of talking, or even thinking, I listen and look. Haze twinkles and bends in the city below. An older lady complains that “her darling”

Jordan Wolfson won't have a piece at the fair. This is surprising, I think. Considering the shifting political tides and art's love affair with overcorrection, I'd almost expect a dozen, maybe two dozen, "edgy" Wolfsons at the fair. Then again, the art world consistently proves itself incapable of keeping up with culture, let alone leading or countering it, so perhaps the nonresponse is consistent.

Later, I watch a group of men take photos beside a giant, taxidermied polar bear in the library. The bear stands on its hind legs and wears a rosary around its neck. It must be nine feet tall. Ominous.



The bear.

Sloane finds me and I can tell she found fun.

We get lost on the way out and end up in a hallway of mirrors and portraits somewhere in the basement, accessed through a door we were told not to open. Sloane can't stop

laughing. The guy she's with insists Walt Disney's head is stored somewhere down here. "Just use your imagination," he says, "and you'll find it." Hours ago, I told my friend Eliza Thomas I'd meet her at Arty Nelson's party, but now my phone's dead, so I follow this thread to the end.

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WEDNESDAY MORNING. Predawn. Time to get up. I haven't slept.

Today's the first day of Felix, the fair that takes place at the Hollywood Roosevelt around the Hockney-painted pool. We've decided to launch some free zines of collected work by LA artists precisely as that fair opens, and plan to sink them to the bottom of the pool as part of the rollout. It's my job to get the zines in the pool undetected, hence the early start.

I drive toward Hollywood as the sun comes up, windows down to shed my triple headache—Delta tequila, Getty champagne, and all that fun with Sloane in the hallway. At the stoplight on Highland I remember talking to Simon Rex about my favorite Losel Yauch painting. Or did he just look like Simon Rex? . . . I keep driving.

I park and slip through the Roosevelt's service door to avoid the front desk, walk twenty steps to the pool, and unload the zines into the water.

My job is done. I can rest. I drive home.

Hours later, I wake up to a phone call from Sloane. "Some guy died in the pool," she says. "Diving for the zines?" I ask. Sloane tells me to have some sympathy. It's a tragedy, she says, he died in there last night. A heart condition or something. They've closed the pool for the rest of the week. No swimming allowed. She pauses, then, almost reluctantly: "Do you think it's haunted?"

I get to the fair around midday and the vibes are way off. For the fair's sake, I wish I could pin it on the pool, but, really, it's less mystical. Felix this year feels muted. When the fair began, there was a novelty to it. Presentations reflected Felix's ethos as an alternative to Frieze: riskier work, less commercial, more carefully curated . . . at times even site-specific and experimental. Naturally, this lifted spirits all around. This year, though, transactions are the clear MO. Rooms are overstuffed with salable, common work. With a few exceptions, things feel leveled, and yet somehow with pretense, as if many exhibitors would really just rather be at Frieze. Conversations pointed to rising fair costs and tighter markets as culprits, so I get it, but that doesn't make me feel any better about the art.

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Whatever, the hallways are claustrophobic and sticky, so I duck into Sea View's room, where I catch Sara Lee Hantman putting the finishing touches on what sounds like a two-painting deal. I get some energy from that. A few minutes later, I check out Jason Yates's work in Von Ammon's room, and that's nice, too.

On my way out, I run into James Franco and then, separately, Julia Fox, so—yes, confirmed—it's haunted.

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LATER THAT NIGHT I go from Lisson's Kelly Akashi opening (pretty good) to its afterparty at Gigi's (a horror). It's where I finally link up with Eliza.

"This feels like tryouts for Soho House," she says, clocking a woman in fur.



Karma's Genghis Cohen party.

We wait for the hors d'oeuvres guy to come back with more miniature lamb chops. We wait for the bartender to make everyone else a paloma. We wait to see an art star other than Jonas Wood, who, I swear, was everywhere this week.

I hold my breath as one of Eliza's friends talks about layering Dior Sauvage with a much cheaper smoky scent. Something like that. He saw it on TikTok. "It boosts libido," he says. It's time to go, I say.

The Karma party at Genghis Cohen is better. There's more at play. Outside, I see weed, cigarettes, even coffee on the patio. Inside, everyone's tucked into a nook or a pocket or a corner, so it feels intimate, but still substantial. Plus, there's good food and a lot of it, buffet-style. And multiple open bars. And seductive, low red light. All great for morale.

We drop into a booth and stay there the rest of the night. Many, many drinks. I meet a lot of new people and remember none of their names. One guy talks about New Theater's Night of Speeches 2 performance that night ("How was it?" "Well, it was a night of speeches, so you can probably guess . . ."), but almost everyone else brings up the guy who died in the pool. Not in a glib way, really, more as a way to process. The legend grows with time. First it's an old man on vacation. Then it's a young collector. Then it's an art installer who smashed a timeless ceramic. After a handful of martinis, Caine says he thinks it was premeditated.

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FRIEZE OPENS THURSDAY morning. I'm there around noon. I see Jeffrey Deitch and ask him how it's going. "Good, good, yes," he mutters, but he doesn't look me in the eyes because he's on the move, made anxious by a small commotion near the front of his booth. I follow him. Turns out it's James Franco (again), this time with the inimitable (and infamous) Stefan Simchowicz, who's taking photographs of Franco with a man who reminds me of the Aussie hotel manager from The White Lotus. They're all bear-hugging and full of congratulations, handshakes, laughs. Jeffrey joins the triumvirate, turns on his charm, and slowly guides them off in another direction, restoring peace to his side of the fair.

I meet up with Sloane and we get lost a few times. I see an Erwin Wurm sculpture that I like. That's about it. Honestly, it's hard to see anything. The fair is mobbed. Sloane tells me she likes the Laura Owens painting at Zwirner. A lady nearby overhears this, leans in, and snarls, "It's old." She has teeth like daggers. "From 2003. It doesn't even look like a Laura Owens," she says, and then disappears into the crowd.

We take a nap inside Chris Burden's *Nomadic Folly* (2001), a "Turkish inspired" tent installation with pillows on the floor. The fabric drowns out the din of the fair and we fade.



Nap spot at Frieze.

After our nap, we go to the Polo Lounge.

We leave there just in time to make it to "enfants terribles," a reading/party in the basement/dungeon of Madame Siam's in Hollywood. We get there right at the end. We missed all the readings, which is good because I don't like readings.

Everyone's smoking in the stairwell, so that's what I do, too. I lose Sloane. I go home.

* * *

SAVE THE BEST for last, right?

Friday I go to Post-Fair, LA's new satellite fair run by Chris Sharp, housed in the historic Santa Monica Post Office. High ceilings. Huge windows. Tons of space. Marble. A much-needed respite from Frieze's trade-show bedlam. Maybe thirty galleries, total. It's restrained and precise. I can actually look at the art. My favorite presentation is right up front, where CASTLE has a sublime suite of Victor Boulet paintings.



Victor Boulet at Post-Fair.

One, two, skip a few, ninety-nine, a hundred. Diva Corp is one of many hosts for a party Friday night called "Pretty Friends" (along with Bel Ami, Casual Encountersz, Eckhaus Latta, Jasmine Johnson, Umm . . . , New Theater, Hannah Hoffman, etc.). It's set to take place in Chinatown at the legendary Hop Louie, revived for the first time since closing in 2016. We all get ready together.

On our way over, we stop at Pio Pico to watch Evan Holloway's performance at the massive FRIDGE, LA group show. Holloway wears a pink mask and electrocutes pickles on an iron chandelier. A mad scientist. Fantastic.



Outside Hop Louie.

At Hop Louie, the line's long and the door's a mess. The bouncer has multiple lists and he checks everyone off by hand. "It's not even alphabetical," he says as he searches for names. Inside, the drinks come fast and everything's drenched in red. It isn't "without fun," like the Deitch party, apparently. The DJs keep the dance floor immaculate—early it's aughts pop, later it radiates disco and underground. I see a girl opening windows to keep the whole place from overheating. Or to smoke. Or both. Someone tells me this is the last party he'll ever go to. He's ecstatic about that, so I guess we should be honored.

I leave for an afterparty in a van full of people. We end up at the Magic Castle Hotel, the

dingy spot down the hill from the actual Magic Castle, which Sloane says is haunted by a piano player named Irma.

The week is over.



Going upstairs at Hop Louie.

NOTES

1. Name changed to protect privacy.
2. Name changed to protect privacy.
3. Name changed to protect privacy.