

PLASTER

Frieze LA rewind: “How’s this for making art under duress?”

By Janelle Zara | February 26, 2025

Both Los Angeles and the world are undergoing major changes. Janelle Zara reports from a reflective yet optimistic Frieze Week and asks: is the traditional fair model taking its dying breaths?



Wednesday

On the official Xavier Hufkens tour of Los Angeles, the last stop was Thomas Houseago’s studio, a sprawling complex along the LA River with an enormous showroom and on-site sculpture park. We (a small group of advisors, collectors and Hufkens directors, plus my painter partner Joe Reihsen and I) met Houseago in the more intimate space of his studio, where he had been clawing a demon out of a monumental hunk of clay. Barefoot and slightly manic, he extolled the “cosmic dissociation,” of the artistic process. “There’s no way to do this sculpture and stay cool,” he said. “It just fucking devours your life.”

For the next hour, Houseago spoke of the demons, vulnerability and residual traumas within his practice. His Leeds accent had become almost American over the course of two

decades, with the exception of an occasional “knawwha’Imean?” After the halfway point, depleted collectors had begun drifting toward the back of the room in search of places to sit. But Joe and I felt so energised, like we had just ingested uncut artistic madness. Having visited Sterling Ruby’s colossal studio just before Houseago’s, suddenly the masculine ego seemed so fascinating to me. As we left, I couldn’t help but wonder, What if testosterone was a drug that you could snort?

It was an excellent start to Frieze Week, something I really wasn’t looking forward to six weeks ago. In the ongoing fallout of the January fires, it just seemed too soon and too superficial. Shouldn’t we concentrate on rebuilding? I thought. But rebuilding would require making money. Moving forward with the fairs was a community decision not to fall further behind.

Joe and I did the Hollywood gallery rounds: Tschabalala Self at Deitch. Barry McGee and Katsu Sawada at The Hole. Seeing Bruce Nauman’s early work at Marian Goodman was like hearing the very first knock-knock joke; you couldn’t possibly imagine how exciting it was in its time, yet it’s the foundation of everything we do today.

Kelly Akashi is so funny. “How’s this for making art under duress?” she asked at her opening at Lisson, making light of the fact that she had recently lost everything in the fires. Choosing comedy over tragedy was a conscious decision. She might be the most well-adjusted person I know.

We marveled at the miraculous hors d’oeuvres at Kelly’s party at Gigi’s, where we ate lamb chops with our fingers and wondered where to most elegantly stash the bones. “These are like \$5 each,” said critic Travis Diehl, delighted by the deviled eggs. We got to the Karma party at Ghengis Cohen in time to find everyone in various shades of blackout. We so needed this, I realised. Solid ragers are integral to the healing process. Conversation topics included the rise of politically incorrect tattoos and Diva Corp’s identity. (My guess is more than one person, mostly white.) A girlfriend told me someone had died in the Roosevelt Hotel pool just before Felix opened, and showed me a picture of a ‘POOL CLOSED’ sign where the box for ‘Fecal accident or other water contamination’ had been checked. (‘Dead body’ was not an option.) Apropos of absolutely nothing, two academic types told me they like Buck Ellison’s work largely because it’s hot. They also want to fuck Buck Ellison.

Thursday

Now that Frieze LA is in its sixth edition, I’ve adopted a few annual traditions. I like to start opening day by wildly oversleeping, filing a rushed article, then arriving at the fair at the

very tail end of previews. When it comes to coverage, I do not plan ahead. I'd rather gather my intel on the ground, carefully parsing truth from diplomacy. "I had a lot of intimate conversations today," for example, is a diplomatic way of saying "we had time to kill." A veteran gallery director then diplomatically told me she'd rather not be quoted about the fair. "I just don't have anything nice to say."

There weren't no sales. A few galleries did sell out their booths, and the big galleries always come through with a few million-dollar transactions. But there were visibly fewer people—mostly advisors on behalf of clients who had canceled at the last minute. "They didn't think it was appropriate to come, although I disagree," said Gagosian director Harmony Murphy. She poured me a coffee cup of champagne and then we had a little lounge in Chris Burden's *Nomadic Folly* (2001), a Turkish-inspired tent that would have been absolutely cooked for cultural appropriation in 2020. But in 2025, visitors visibly appreciated its layered rugs and pillows as a place to hide and unwind. Harmony also seemed unusually relaxed. "It's a very non-commercial piece," she said. "Obviously we're not really selling art here today."

For local collectors, even those who hadn't lost their homes, the fires shifted their priorities. One said she felt undue pressure from dealers to buy while her ability to insure works was uncertain. Some galleries stopped allowing holds for PDFs and insisted on purchases, she added, and called this "a week of people asking for money." Some former Palisades residents were requesting PDFs of works they had lost in the fire, hoping their insurance might cover the primary prices rather than their dwindling value on the secondary market. I also heard of one former Palisades resident who sold her large-scale *George Condo* back to the gallery. From now on she only wanted small blue-chip works that she could load in the car and drive away with.

At Post-Fair, LA gallerist Chris Sharp's new low-cost satellite fair, no one was really going gangbusters with sales either. But everyone, myself included, seemed happy to be there. The lineup was spectacular, the work was great, relationships had been sown. The venue, a 1938 Art Deco post office, was also beautiful, according to Chris Scott of Dallas gallery Tureen. "There is so much wonderful art that people make look garbage because of the way that they display it," he said, lamenting when fair presentations "really have nothing special about them, nothing curated about the experience." And just like that, it hit me: that's Frieze.

Having Post-Fair as a point of comparison suddenly made Frieze seem so dismal; the final minutes of the former were higher energy than the latter's final hour, where dealers had already left their booths vacant 15 minutes before closing. I can't imagine a worse experience of viewing art. Overall, Frieze and others like it represent a certain state of denial in the art world—the insistence that business is going better than it is; that the art is any good; or that a fair whose parent company now belongs to private equity isn't breathing its

dying breaths. Higher quality, less profitable and community-oriented, Post-Fair seems like the future. It's even in the name.

“Post-Fair seems like the future. It's even in the name”

Friday

“Your control.”

“My control.”

“Your control.”

In aviation parlance, this is how co-pilots vocalise their trade-off of the wheel, and I had just been given control of a tiny propeller plane on its way to Malibu. I was on last-minute assignment to cover Day Flight (2025), a Frieze Projects piece choreographed by the artist Madeline Hollander and performed by my flight instructor Andrew. I was moved by what each of them showed me. You can read about that [here](#). Above a thick fog that conjured memories of smoke, I flew for about 90 seconds, making two successful left turns before handing over control of the 45-minute flight. Andrew asked if I'd like to try taxiing on the tarmac after we landed, and I said, “Honestly, no thanks.” I already drove 45 minutes to get here, and it was so nice just being driven.

Today I wrote one article, flew a plane, then wrote two more, around 1,500 words total. I did not do my finest work, but I did see André 3000 outside the fair. According to one reputable source, more celebrities came on day two than day one to avoid opening day press, concerned that conspicuous consumption would seem insensitive. Funny! In the art world, the conspicuous consumption of art is lauded as philanthropy.

Back in the good ol' days, specifically Frieze LA 2020, White Cube threw a takeover of Chateau Marmont so legendary it left a permanent mark on LA's art world lore. A few interest rate hikes and market contractions later, no one gallery would splurge on an event like that today. Certainly not in this economy. But that's the beauty of mutual aid, LA's greatest takeaway from the fires. In the absence of institutional support, we learned to identify members of our communities and pool our resources. The Pretty Friends party was a 10/10, chef's kiss perfect example of that—a one-night only reboot of the shuttered and beloved Chinatown watering hole Hop Louie, co-hosted by a handful of galleries (Bel Ami, Hannah Hoffman, Paul Soto and Stars), online literary entities (Diva Corp, Casual

Encountersz, and Umm), DJs (Jon Santos, Jasmine Johnson + Ali RQ, and Midnite Salad), New Theater Hollywood and fashion brand Eckhaus Latta.

Together they assembled the perfect ingredients: a shitshow of a door, indoor smoking, multiple rooms to find and lose track of your friends. Cash bar? We accept. You can't have 2020 aspirations with a 2025 budget. In the low red lights of an inauthentically Chinese restaurant, we danced to Millennial proto-Brats like Santigold, Paris Hilton and Tatu. Once again, everyone lost their shit to Kelly Clarkson's Since You've Been Gone. I swear to God that song is like crack. To our hosts, a big thank you for your service.

Joe and I drove home through the fog that had come inland like a Hollywood noir scene. "This looks like a curse," I said, and he said "No, it's a blessing. Fog is like a blanket putting us to bed."

Saturday

The heroic affirmations about LA have been a little... severe. "LOS ANGELES IS LIKE A PHOENIX RISING FROM THE ASHES," a Jessica Silverman quote pulled from an Art Newspaper story, has been circulating, all-caps, on my feed. The new Instagram account @artnotet, the art world's new @stylenotcom, now turns news articles into memes. People will really do anything to not read.

For visitors to LA, I recommend learning the rules and joys of driving—avoiding rush hour, blasting music in the meditative clarity of the open road. I drove all over town today. Highlights include painter Ben Noam's Journal gallery exhibition of portraits, ironically relocated to LA after surviving a fire in New York; two shows at Matthew Brown—one of Michelle Uckotter's paintings and another of the Alta/Paso quilting group, organized by Kenturah Davis; and David Hammons' Concerto in Black and Blue (2002) at Hauser & Wirth. As another Frieze tradition, I like to save looking at art for the last day of fair week, when my spirit needs it most.