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'TURKEY IS BECOMING VERY POWERFUL, AND VERY INTERNATIONAL': CONTEMPORARY ISTANBUL FAIR OPENS AMID SHIFTING GEOPOLITICS AND A STRONG ECONOMY

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The 18th edition of Contemporary Istanbul art fair opened yesterday (until 1 October) at Tersane Istanbul, a former Ottoman shipping yard on the shore of the picturesque Golden Horn estuary in Turkey's largest city.

67 galleries from 22 countries are participating this year, including Anna Laudel from Istanbul and Düsseldorf, Zilberman from Istanbul and Berlin, Johannesburg's Kalashnikov Gallery, Riga's Lazy Mike, Barcelona's Galeria Joan Gaspar, and the Dubai- and New York-based Leila Heller Gallery. Fair stands were being installed right up until the opening, with galleries hanging works three hours before the fair's 4pm VIP preview, and tables being unwrapped for a lounge well into an hour after Contemporary Istanbul officially opened its doors. More than 40,000 people are expected to attend the fair.

"Turkey is becoming very powerful, and very international, on this side of the world. It's a new market in a beautiful city," said the director of Contemporary Istanbul, Aslı Ünal. "And soon as [the art dealers] understand it, they will come here with more confidence. It's a risk and I understand that going into a new markets, they don't know the culture [and] think that we're something else. Sometimes I have to explain to them, invite them here, host them, show them around."

Turkish artists dominated the fair, with several galleries showing works priced in the six figures, including a \$130,000 black-and-white abstract work by Canan Tolon, a Turkish artist who lives in the San Francisco Bay Area, at Istanbul's Dirimarts. Two AI-generated video works by the prominent Turkish-American artist Refik Anadol, each priced at €100,000, are shown by Pilevneli, and Zilberman has brought a large-scale painting by Azade Köker for €110,000.

Among the pricier works by international artists at the fair are a dangling Wim Delvoye sculpture composed of laser-cut quatrefoil-dotted church spires, for €550,000 at Pilevneli; a Tony Cragg sculpture for €350,000 and a \$250,000 neon by Peter Halley, both at Sevil Dolmacı; a €275,000 large-scale bronze sculpture of a bandaged head by Igor Mitora at Galeria Joan Gaspar; and a \$220,000 abstract work by Sarah Morris at Dirimart.

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Contemporary Istanbul also provides several four- to five-figure options. The first-time participant Kalashnikov Gallery is offering a €2,100 painting by Kylie Wentzel and two €15,000 canvases of purple pantyhose by Turiya Magadlela. Callirrhoë from Athens, another gallery showing at the fair for the first time, exhibited a selection of works by Greek artists, including Yorgos Stamkopoulos and Vasilis Papageorgiou, and the Turkish-Greek artist Valinia Svoronou, ranging from a wood and ceramic work by Selma Köran for €950 to a soothing blue €8,700 negative space abstract painting by Stamkopoulos. "Istanbul has a huge history and culture and combining contemporary art I find fascinating because it brings an open dialogue," said the gallery's founder Olympia Tzortzi.

According to Levent Özmen, a director at Dirimart, a number of loyal collectors wait "all year" and plan vacations and work around the fair".

Despite rampant inflation over the past few years, the Turkish economy grew beyond expectations in the second quarter of 2023, with its GDP rising 3.8 percent, according to the Financial Times. In addition to the economic woes, the country is still recovering from the devastating February earthquake and a precarious political climate, but Contemporary Istanbul remains undeterred. "The challenge is all around the world," said Ünal. "It just has more of a spotlight because we're Turkey."

An hour before the first preview day's 8pm closing, most galleries remained mum about sales, with many saying that reserves had been placed, but deals had yet to be closed. The New York gallery C24 reported a handful of sales, including a painting by İrfan Önürmen that sold for \$32,500, while the Istanbul gallery Pilot said that a Zeren Göktan work weaved by Turkish prisoners as a statement on honour killings went for €10,000. Sevil Dolmacı told The Art Newspaper that a Tony Cragg sculpture had sold.

"I want galleries to succeed and leave happy," said Ünal. If the recent uptick in the economy is any indication, Turkish collectors may be eager to acquire.

• Full disclosure: The Art Newspaper's Turkish edition, which launched earlier this year, is owned by Ali Gureli, who is the founder of Contemporary Istanbul.

<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2023/09/27/contemporary-istanbul-fair-sales-report>