

London Frieze Art Fair: Serious collectors reveal what to look out for this week

By Holly Williams

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The Outset team are pictured in front of 'Flaga 1972- 2000', by Simon Starling

Established in 2003, London's Frieze Art Fair has become a crucial date in the international art-world diary. Focusing on living artists, the event attracts culture vultures as much as it does industry types looking for the hottest young artists or to plug a gap in their collections – and more than 60,000 people will flock to Regent's Park for the event, which takes place this coming Tuesday to Friday.

But while there will be a sculpture park, talks, film and music in addition to artists' projects, first and foremost it remains a marketplace: 170 galleries from across the world will be turning up to showcase their most exciting offerings.

Even in the recent economic climate, Frieze has done a decent trade – not quite at pre-crash levels, but brisk enough. While the average creatively minded tourist might balk even at the £20 ticket price, the serious art set are putting together eye-watering budgets that run into the tens, if not hundreds of thousands of pounds.

So who are the people who keep the wheels of the art industry turning? And how does a committed collector decide which work is worth its price tag – through canny commercial sense and an eye for posterity, or gut instinct and personal preference? Here, five collectors – from the self-taught enthusiast to the corporate buyer – share their tastes, tips and techniques for approaching one of the world's most important art happenings...

Candida Gertler

Co-director and trustee, Outset Contemporary Art Fund

"The Outset/Frieze Art Fair Fund was created nine years ago. My partner Yana Peel and I felt we wanted to help boost public collection [the fund uses privately donated money and corporate sponsors such as the hotel brand Le Meridien to buy works at Frieze which are then donated to the Tate]. It meant that those showing at Frieze would know from the very beginning that important buyers, such as the Tate, were coming, so you'd get galleries bringing their very best work. It was also intended to give patrons an opportunity to explore the collecting process of such an institution.

"Our budget is between £120,000 and £150,000, depending on sponsorship. The most pieces we bought in one year was in 2006, when we bought 12; last year, we bought only three pieces. But one was by [the African-American artist] Lorna Simpson, and we had bought a minor work of hers in 2008, so we were very pleased to come back to that artist – it really consolidated our strategy.

"The Tate's collections have become more international, and our selections at Frieze fit into that. But it very much needs to fit in to their collecting strategy – it's not about following a trend or thinking, 'This guy is hot.'

"For the art world in Britain, Frieze has done an awful lot. It brings the international art world to our doorstep. And I am very much looking forward to it on a personal level, too."

Maria Fay

Amateur enthusiast

"I come from a working-class Essex family; it wasn't the sort of family where you visited galleries or collected art. And although I never really thought about it as 'collecting', I suppose I began eight years ago.

"My decisions on what to buy are usually visceral. Art has to make me think and feel completely different; it's got to be beyond words. I work as an executive coach in the media, design and marketing sectors and it's a logical way of working – art connects with a very different side of you.

"I've got about 16 to 18 pieces now. They're usually, on the face of it, aesthetically pleasing but they always have a sour underbelly, a bit of wit. It all lives with me, I have most of it up on the walls. It would knock the joy out of it if I had to bet on it appreciating; that's not the reason I buy art.

"I treat Frieze like an art holiday. I've been going for five or six years now. The gallerists are approachable and it's helped me break down any self-consciousness I have about approaching private galleries.

"My favourite piece is Matthew Brannon's *Shouldn't I?*. It was from his exhibition with the Approach gallery in 2009. It cost £6,000 and is my most expensive piece.

"I wasn't going to buy anything this year, but then I heard that the Casey Kaplan Gallery is doing a solo Matthew Brannon exhibition..."

Carl Kostyal

Private collector and dealer

"I've been collecting for about 12 years. I grew up with it – my grandmother was an Old Masters collector. You develop an eye for it – and then you can't stop looking.

"What I collect changes according to whatever the current batch of geniuses are up to. I've gone through a few waves of different formal aesthetics but the most important thing is just to try to keep abreast of everything that is going on.

"The best bits of your collection are going to be from the same generation as you are – you have a chance to get the best works being made now at a reasonable price.

"I have 300 to 400 pieces in my collection. I personally collect the young stuff, but I deal in more-established contemporary artists, too. At Frieze I'll be looking for works by Helen Marten and Tobias Madison. Last year I got a great Alex Hubbard for around £25,000.

"There are tons of great galleries around Europe that you have a chance to catch up with at Frieze. Preparation helps, knowing what you want: otherwise it will be an expensive week! But if you see a strong work by an artist you follow, you can't help it, you have to get it – though there is the variable of economic upturns and downturns, which people are always going to be influenced by, even if they say they're not."

Valeria Napoleone

Private collector of work by women

"I've been collecting since 1997. I have roughly 200 works and I collect female artists. It was a spontaneous fascination not a strategic move, but if I have to attribute a reason, it's because when I started buying it was a very interesting moment: women artists were finally getting a lot of attention. It's about quality of work: there are so many exceptional artists who just happen to be women that I never feel restricted.

"I'm very selective: I research an artist, go to their studio and meet them. Once I'm convinced, I have to get the right piece. If they haven't done it yet, I'll just wait. I give myself time to make sure I love the work.

"I buy throughout the year rather than collecting at fairs, but Frieze is such a high-quality fair that it's important to see a lot in one place at one time.

"Usually, I decide beforehand what I'm going to buy. I might buy between two and five pieces, a collection of drawings or one or two major pieces. I am very strict on budget. I don't really spend more than £25,000 – although you can get caught up in the excitement.

"I look at works by artists I already have. There are quite a few pieces I am looking at this year – Alexandra Bircken has a show, she's an artist I've been following for a long time, also Haris Epaminonda, Janice Kerbel and Martha Friedman. They're all young, but not just out of school. I never buy new works – Frieze is a good place to start the conversation about a new artist, and maybe in six months or a year, I'll buy."

Alistair Hicks

Art adviser to Deutsche Bank

"I've been working for Deutsche Bank since the mid-1990s. We've been the Frieze Art Fair's main sponsor since 2004. Since I've been here the change [in the art scene] has been dramatic – in the past 15 years, London has become much more forward-looking, it's much more of an art centre, and companies are much more aware of art collecting.

"Frieze has definitely contributed. It filled a niche almost instantly; there was a thirst for it. London is such an international place and that wasn't being served. It's a wonderful, heady mixture of artists, collectors and clients – the art market in full swing.

"We're not buying for investment; we're buying artists who we think will engage our staff in the workplace. The thought has always been new art, new ideas. All the pieces go into our offices; we have nearly 60,000 works in 900 buildings around the world.

"The whole point of our policy is to show that art is about more than money, so we don't really discuss how much works cost. But over the years, we've spent about £1,000 per item – now it's a little bit more than that, but we're not spending huge amounts: 99 per cent of what we buy could be bought by any of our members of staff. It's not about big, splashy works.

"It's our job to know what is going on in the art world, but the greatest need is always to be open. Expectations can blinker what you're going to see, but it's 70 per cent preparation, 30 per cent desperately hoping you'll find something that will surprise you. And Frieze has never not surprised me!"