How gallerists choose artists for art fairs
Four Art Basel exhibitors discuss a tricky, and often secretive, process

by Karim Crippa
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On Christmas Eve last year, Los Angeles gallerist Louis Stern, of Louis Stern Fine Arts, decided that he would apply to Art Basel Miami Beach with Californian painter Helen Lundeberg (1908–1999). That day, he had a meeting with his staff, during which they talked about their upcoming art fairs. When Art Basel came up, recalls Stern, ‘we discussed two to three artists, and in the end, the option the team supported most was Lundeberg. I very much respect their opinion and we felt that it was her time.’

No artwork is brought to a fair by coincidence. But the selection process remains secretive. Which factors do gallerists consider when choosing with whom to apply, particularly for sectors where the number of artists is limited? ‘You want to make sure you put your best foot forward,’ says Stern. He stuck with Lundeberg and will be showing the post-Surrealist painter’s abstracted landscapes in the Survey sector, which is dedicated to historical positions. ‘Part of my philosophy is to take artists that never got their due and show the artworld how they’ve contributed to art history. With Lundeberg especially, I want people to see her work in the flesh,’ he adds.

Todd Gray,
Euclidean Gris Gris (Tropic of Entropy), 2019. Four archival pigment prints in artist’s frames and found frames, UV laminate, 182.9 x 221 x 7.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist and David Lewis, New York City.

To shed light on artistic practices the public may not be familiar with is a recurring argument. New York City’s David Lewis says that, when a collector first introduced him to the work of Todd Gray (b. 1954, Los Angeles), it was ‘a revelation, the discovery of something that was at once layered and sensual.’ Gray received much attention for his
photographic collages at this year’s Whitney Biennial, and Lewis, who will be presenting his work in the Nova sector, hopes the Miami Beach audience will be equally ‘thrilled to continue to discover the artist.’ The same goes for acb Galéria, from Budapest, which will present works by the Hungarian artist and poet Katalin Ladik (b. 1942, Novi Sad, Serbia) in the Survey sector. ‘Our vision is to enhance Ladik’s acknowledgment in professional and collector circles from the US and Latin America,’ says the gallery’s director Orsolya Hegedüs.

An artist’s personal history – and how viewers might relate to it – also often plays a key role. Jakarta’s ROH Projects will show Indonesian painter I Nyoman Masriadi (b. 1973, Gianyar, Indonesia) in the Nova sector. His figurative paintings incorporate ‘inherent aspects of local Indonesian culture, while relating to topics that are universal in nature,’ writes the gallery’s director Jun Tirtadji. Ladik developed her interdisciplinary practice inspired by the female condition during a challenging time – an ‘era of state socialism in an environment dominated by men,’ says Hegedüs, ‘a context where gender awareness was not yet present.’ As for Gray, Lewis believes that his career ‘as a photographer of some of the most famous figures in American music’ (including the now highly controversial star Michael Jackson) contributes to making the artist’s work attractive for audiences.

Timeliness also influences gallerists in their decision-making process. ‘Fairs are about timing, and if yours is good, it works out,’ says Stern, who notes that he has observed ‘a real resurgence of works from the 1930s, the period during which Lundeberg started painting.’ New political sensibilities often play a key role: Stern acknowledges that the fact Lundeberg was a woman has been a significant factor in choosing her. Acb’s Hegedüs adds that ‘a special “momentum” in an artist’s career can be decisive in the selection process.’ This is certainly true of Ladik’s trajectory: After decades spent in ‘disadvantageous social and political circumstances,’ the artist has garnered much critical success in the past few years. She was included in documenta 14 and awarded the 2016 Lennon Ono Grant for Peace. Tirtadji also mentioned Masriadi’s Asia Society Asia Arts Game Changer Award in 2013 to explain his increasing international popularity, and therefore their decision to apply with him. But ultimately, there is one key factor gallerists will always take into account when it comes to making the final decision: their intuition.

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