

Art Basel 2016 Highlights

Elliat Albrecht | Basel | 21 June 2016



Image: Art Basel 2016. Photo: © Timothée Chambovet & Ocula.

On the tail of the opening of contemporary art biennial Manifesta 11 in Zurich, the trains in Switzerland were busier than usual as the art world flocked west to the 47th edition of Art Basel in its hometown of Basel on the Swiss-German-French tripoint. There, 286 leading galleries from 33 countries unpacked their crates, and despite uncertainty induced by decreased auction sales in the past quarter, hung their best inventory in the anticipation of sales to important clients. The atmosphere during the first few days certainly suggested that they might be in luck: the fair opened on Tuesday morning to a flood of VIP collectors and a scent in the air that could only be described as the mingling of very expensive colognes. Ocula was on the ground to report on highlights at the fair and surrounding events.

Cabinet Gallery

There was an amorous theme in London-based Cabinet Gallery's booth, which included works by several big names such as Ed Atkins, Danny McDonald and Mark Leckey. A highlight was an edition of the notorious British artist Cosey Fanni Tutti's *Sexy Confessions of a Shop Assistant, Magazine Action*, (1976), a titillating spread of a low-cost erotic periodical in which Tutti acted as glamour model. It is one of the more well-known works from an artist who has spent decades participating in the pornography industry as a self-aware exploration of gender politics. A slightly more conservative literary reference could be found in Pierre Klossowski's resin and wood sculpture *Diane & Acteon*, (1991), which drew from a myth in Roman poet Ovid's magnum opus *Metamorphoses*. In the story, a young hunter happens upon a goddess bathing who splashes him with water in embarrassment, transforming him into a deer who is later hunted and killed. In Klossowski's sculpture however, the animal met a happier fate, grasping the goddess in an uncurbed embrace. Other favourites included Lucy McKenzie's hyperrealist paintings of books, and a beautiful untitled Jim Nutt line drawing from 2013, which looked as if one of Matisse's models had suffered a broken nose.



Image: Cabinet Gallery at Art Basel 2016. Photo: © Timothée Chambovet & Ocula.

Andrew Dadson's *Painted Plants* (2015) at Parcours

The plein air sector of Art Basel, Parcours presented 19 site-specific artworks installed around Munsterhugel in the heart of Basel's old town. Free to the public, Parcours aimed to animate

historical spaces and provide an opportunity for the local community to engage with art without braving the long security lines and admission costs of the fair. A standout contribution this year was Andrew Dadson's *Black Plant Sunset*, (2016), installed inside the offices of the municipal Construction and Transportation department, and presented by Galleria Franco Noero, David Kordansky Gallery and Zurich-based RaebervonStenglin. Gaining international attention for weighty white and black paintings that test the physical limits of his medium, Vancouver-based Dadson is also known for his interventions in landscapes: his 'Lawn and Yard' works transform patches of outdoor space (sometimes without their owners' permissions) into glossy black monochromes. For *Parcours*, Dadson covered a cluster of potted plants in non-toxic black paint and illuminated them with UV lights, evoking an eerie glow in the Bau-und Verkehrsdepartement. 'If the plants are left to themselves', Dadson said, 'they will continue to grow under the lamp and shed evidence of my act. They may have remnants of paint here and there, a black stem maybe, but I'm interested in the fact that the plants will forge ahead despite my intervention.'



Image: Andrew Dadson, *Black Plant Sunset*, 2016. Photo: © Sebastiano Pellion da Persano. Courtesy of Raebervonstenglin, Zürich; Galleria Franco Noero, Turin; David Kordansky, Los Angeles.

Galerie Barbara Thumm

The Berlin-based gallery devoted an entire booth to key German avant-garde artist Anna Oppermann's historical *Portrait of Mr. S. (Love, Eroticism, Sex)* (1969-1989). An elaborate, large-scale 'ensemble' of materials collaged and collected over a period of years. The work

included cloth, text, photographs and hand-coloured photo canvases drawing on themes of chaos, eroticism and witchcraft, pointing to the delicate line between heaven and hell that romantic lovers toe. Obscured by drawings and cut-out photos, images of naked bodies were found throughout the installation—but the overt sensuality wasn't reserved to female forms, as art history has made a habit. Next to a reclining male figure, presumably 'Mr S,' a small note read: 'Sexualobjekt - von verschiedenen Seiten zu sehen, zu betrachten, zu verstehen, zu deuten.' ('sex object – to be seen, contemplated, understood, interpreted from a range of angles'.) The work was shown in the Venice Biennale in 1980, and a decade later was installed for three years in a room at the hotel Teufelhof in Basel, where guests were invited to view it from a bed in the centre of the room. Rumour has it that the room was wildly popular among newlyweds as a honeymoon suite.



Image: Galerie Barbara Thumm at Art Basel 2016. Photo © Elliot Albrecht.

Victoria Miro

While some galleries seemed to toss together a hang of whatever would sell the fastest, Victoria Miro's booth had a more thoughtful curatorial concept. Half of the booth was dedicated to portraiture, featuring works by Alice Neel, Kara Walker, Grayson Perry and Celia Paul. An immediate favourite was *Brunette in a Trench Coat* (2016) by Chantal Joffe, whose disposition reminded this writer a little of Otto Dix's *Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden* (1926), albeit

without the cocktail and the tartan. On the other side of the booth works were presented by Yayoi Kusama, a logical choice given her vast retrospective at the gallery's spaces in London. (You will know about this exhibition because of all of the 'Infinity Mirrored Room' pictures popping up on Instagram.) Abstract cracked-tile pieces by Olympic Games-commissioned artist Adriana Varejão and works by Peter Doig, Verne Dawson and Chris Ofili balanced the booth. As part of Unlimited and in collaboration with David Zwirner, Victoria Miro also presented Stan Douglas's film *Luanda-Kinshasa*, 2013, in which the artist reconstructed a legendary recording studio that hosted some of the most renowned musicians of all time including Miles Davis, Bob Dylan and Aretha Franklin.



Image: Victoria Miro at Art Basel 2016. Photo: © Timothée Chambovet & Ocula.

Kunstmuseum Basel

With strong private and government funding, cultural institutions flourish around Basel; there are over 40 museums in the area. An unlikely pairing of works by Alexander Calder and Fischli/Weiss is currently on view at Fondation Beyeler in Riehen, a trip rewarded with no shortage of Swiss charm: one viewer reported spotting grazing cows out the gallery's window. But if you were on a tight schedule and couldn't venture out of Basel's centre, a visit to the the Kunstmuseum Basel would have been a worthy way to spend an afternoon. The museum is comprised of three buildings, the newest of which (designed by Basel-based architects Christ & Gantenbein) opened in April after over three years of construction. The new wing was inaugurated with the exhibition *Sculpture on the Move 1946-2016* (19 April – 18 September 2016),

which maps the ways that sculpture has become flexible and abstract over the past decades. Curated by Bernhard Mendes Bürgi, the exhibition traces the journey from works by Alberto Giacometti and Constantin Brancusi, to the works by artists such as Gilbert & George, Gordon Matta-Clark and Bruce Nauman, and to the experimental works of other artists working today. The gallery also boasts an extensive collection of European art dating from the 15th century and an impressive hanging of modernist masterpieces. Not to be missed in the original building was a show of Barnett Newman's prints that spanned several rooms. Newman is one of the most prominent figures in Abstract Expressionism and mostly known for his hard edge paintings. Most striking in the exhibition are the loose, biomorphic abstractions made in the 1940s when he began working again after destroying all of his earlier work in 1939. The exhibition includes lithographs, silkscreens and etchings which are reminiscent of both the colour field paintings of his contemporaries and his infamous 'zips'. —[O]



Image: Installation view, *Sculpture on the Move 1946 - 2016*, at Kunstmuseum Basel, 2016. Photo: Gina Folly. Courtesy Kunstmuseum Basel.
