

Frieze's London Fairs Are Art World's Latest Cancellations

The premiere fairs are off, and a gallery-based Frieze Week looks doubtful because of the continued challenges of the pandemic.

By Scott Reyburn

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This October's Frieze London and Frieze Masters art fairs, the double-headed centerpiece of the British capital's busiest art market week, have been canceled "in light of continued unprecedented challenges regarding Covid-19 (coronavirus)," the organizers said Tuesday.

Like the May edition of Frieze New York, which was also canceled because of the pandemic, the London fairs will revert to an online-only format. The in-person editions of Frieze London and Frieze Masters, which showcase international gallerists specializing in contemporary pieces and pre-21st-century art, had been scheduled to take place in their temporary structures in Regent's Park from Oct. 8-11. Over the last six years, Frieze London has attracted some 60,000 visitors, according to the fair's website. The slickly presented events have been the main draw for international collectors during the hectic round of fairs, dealer shows, museum exhibitions and auctions that has become known as London's "Frieze Week." Covid-related restrictions on travel and congregation have made that untenable.

"It was inevitable; none of my clients were intending to go to Frieze, and normally they love going to London in October," said Heather Flow, an art adviser based in New York. "I'm pretty adventurous, but I wouldn't have felt comfortable, even if I could leave the country."

Last month, Frieze sent a letter to exhibitors at its Frieze Masters and Frieze London fairs, asking them to confirm participation by June 26. It warned dealers that if the event went ahead it would have to be on a smaller scale, possibly combining the masters and contemporary events in a single venue. The organizers promised a full refund on prepaid stand fees if the fairs were canceled.

"It's a great shame," said Offer Waterman, a London-based exhibitor. "I really wanted to do the fair. Frieze Masters is a core business-getting event for my gallery; there was just too much uncertainty. Large-scale events are still banned."

The London editions of Frieze are the latest in a series of international art fairs that have had to be canceled because of the crisis. Art Basel Hong Kong, scheduled for March, and the 50th anniversary Art Basel fair in Switzerland — first postponed until September — have been other significant casualties. These setbacks followed the premature closure of Tefaf Maastricht in early March, after an exhibitor at the fair in the Netherlands contracted the virus. It later emerged that at least two-dozen exhibitors and visitors had contracted the virus.

Victoria Siddall, global director of Frieze fairs, and her London-based artistic directors Eva Langret and Nathan Clements-Gillespie, said Tuesday in a letter to exhibitors that continued logistical challenges "including continued restrictions placed on events and the complications around travel quarantine" had given them no choice but to cancel.

The signatories added in the letter that London's Frieze Week had become "a cornerstone of the cultural calendar" that they would "continue to celebrate this year."

But dealers remained uncertain that the gallery shows of “Frieze Week” would go ahead without its destination fairs.

“It would be lovely if Frieze Week went ahead, but I don’t envisage it happening,” said Vanessa Carlos, co-founder of the East London gallery Carlos/Ishikawa, a regular exhibitor at Frieze London, who is concerned about the continuing infection rate of the virus.

“I have no plans to reopen at all,” Ms. Carlos said. “Most of my artists don’t live in London. How can it work if they can’t come here and celebrate it? A show is a show, and I want to do it properly.”

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