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DIARY

PARIS WITH THE EFFECT OF RAIN

Art Basel adds luster to the city of light

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The interior of Art Basel Paris at the Grand Palais, October 2024. All photos: the author.

IT MAY BE POSSIBLE to imagine a more anticipated unveiling than Art Basel’s third iteration in Paris, but I find it difficult. From the gloom of the Grand Palais Éphémère that housed it last year on the Champ de Mars, Art Basel Paris emerged in this reprise—having taken over from FIAC—like a butterfly from its chrysalis in the freshly renovated Grand Palais, closed since 2021, which Parisians had only seen during the Olympic and Paralympic events of fencing and tae kwon do. “*Comme c’est beau!*” (It’s gorgeous!), I heard over and over again as I gaped at the light-filled Beaux Arts construction of iron and steel barrel vaults, tinted their hallmark shade of pale pistachio and skinned in glass.

I would see it from inside in the rain, an October deluge sluicing down the transparent panes of the nave in rivulets that made the whole world seem watery. I would see it when night swaddled the building and the blue-chip gallery booths on the lower level glowed like a glittering, roofless, labyrinthine city. And so it would go, for five days, until the lacework structure turned into a main character, all but dwarfing the art inside.

But it's a slim minority who come to Paris in October solely for Art Basel. On everyone's lips were the same earnest refrains: "Have you been to the Surrealism show at the Centre Pompidou? All those Remedios Varos. It's extraordinary!" "Have you seen the Bourse de Commerce's Arte Povera exhibition? The original Penone tree! The original Merz igloo! OMG!" Under the dome of the Grand Palais, of course, the major galleries had trotted out their de Chiricos; White Cube's booth boasted a Dalí.

A few streets away, the next morning, wrought-iron gates blocked off the entrance to Paris Internationale, now in its tenth year. I arrived ahead of the opening and climbed to the rain-washed balcony to note the milky sky over the zinc rooftops of Paris. Usually nomadic, the innovative alternative fair settled for the second time in a dilapidated telephone exchange building. In this site of roughly plastered, exposed brick, chipped, distressed cement floors, and neon lighting, I had the kinds of conversations that Paris Internationale is known for: I spoke with Madison Hames, a young Portland, Oregon, gallerist with strikingly beautiful bleached eyebrows, about a series of pale, intricate mixed-media assemblages by Bonnie Lucas from the late 1970s and '80s, trenchant works ahead of their time. I admired the uncanny, frisson-inducing meowing robotic cats and ceramic cobras of Gerrit Frohne-Brinkmann at Berlin's Noah Klink booth. I chatted with the founders of the Marseille-based gallery SISSI Club, originally a project space, about their year of first-time fair attendance that was culminating here.