

Batty, David. "Art Basel: A Dose of Reality with Exhibits on Snooping and Migration," The Guardian, June 18, 2016

theguardian

Art Basel: A Dose of Reality with Exhibits on Snooping and Migration

Samson Young and Chiharu Shiota among artists whose works bring global political turmoil to art market's top event

David Batty
June 18, 2016



Dan Graham Lisson gallery at Art Basel. Photograph: Art Basel

From mass surveillance to the migration crisis, anxiety about a world in political turmoil permeated this year's Art Basel, the world's largest contemporary and modern art fair in Switzerland.

Dressed in a police uniform, Hong Kong artist Samson Young mounted a “non-lethal” sonic cannon – usually used to disperse protesters – to shoot the calls of distressed birds above the well-heeled crowds, in a work that references the history of migration from Vietnam and mainland China to the former British colony.

Elsewhere in the aircraft hangar-sized hall of the fair’s Unlimited section – which showcases monumental works aimed at museums and super-rich collectors – more than a hundred vintage suitcases hang and wobble from red ropes suspended on a slope. Chiharu Shiota’s installation *Accumulation: Searching for Destination* evokes the uncertain status of refugees.

The French artist Kader Attia’s installation *The Culture of Fear: An invention of Evil* explores the toxic legacy of colonialism, featuring images from newspapers and books from the late 19th and early 20th century depicting African, Arab and Native American men murdering and raping white women – racist stereotypes that still resonate in contemporary fears about terrorism.



Visitors at this year’s Art Basel. Photograph: Andi Cortellini Fotograf/Art Basel

“These are very dynamic times,” said Art Basel director Marc Spiegler ahead of the fair’s public opening. “We have major political elections coming up. We have major referenda coming up. We have mass migration in Europe. We have economic uncertainties. From an artistic standpoint [this] creates a lot of material for artists to work with. Interesting times make for interesting art.”

For all the political work on show in the curated sections of the fair, Art Basel is mainly an event for the international art market, with an estimated £2.38bn (\$3.4bn) of works displayed by 286 galleries from 33 countries. Among the most expensive pieces sold were Paul McCarthy’s *Tomato Head (Green)*, a warped and super-sized take on Mr Potato Head, which fetched £3.3m, and Gerhard Richter’s 36ft-wide digital print *930-7 Strip*, priced at £2.4m.

Visitors uneasy with the contrast between billionaire art buyers and the social criticisms of some of the exhibits might appreciate Hans Op de Beeck’s *The Collector’s House*. The ash-grey plaster installation, complete with a grand piano, an art library, drawing room and neo-classical sculptures set

around a lotus pond, resembles a petrified villa of a Pompeii nobleman in what could be seen as a critique of the dead hand of the global elite on the art world.

Meanwhile Zoom Pavilion by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and Krzysztof Wodiczko gave visitors a disorientating encounter with mass surveillance, with 12 robotic cameras capturing the audience, and rendering the footage on the gallery walls in real time. Ranging from landscape shots to super-sized closeups, the work, presented by London gallery Carroll Fletcher, encapsulates the uncomfortable intersection of the surveillance state with selfie culture.