

REPORT

Seeing the bigger picture

Art adviser Datin Shalini Ganendra on experiencing the magic of Art Basel in situ

In the frenzied world of Art fairs and high rollers, Art Basel is the undisputed champion, marking the beginning, development and standard for galleries to signify accomplishment and quality. A gallery's acceptance into Art Basel, Switzerland, signifies the pinnacle of branding success, heralding recognition, success and expensive art. Very simply put, participation in the fair is an expensive exercise, so the art needs to be as well, to cover costs.

However, the vision of Art Basel's founder, Ernst Beyeler, has led to startling results that not only created a commercial hub for galleries, visitors and museums during the Art Basel dates but also extends far beyond to include meaningful exploration of the city. Art Basel is truly about experiencing the bigger picture, so to speak.

This was my first visit to Art Basel and, indeed, to Basel. Landing at the very basic Basel Airport, one is faced with the curious choice of exiting to three countries — a hint of the expansive cultural terrain that lies ahead.

At the fair, parties and cocktails abounded, with a steady flow of wine tastings in the VIP rooms. However, the quality programming complemented commercial offerings, along with offsite events, exhibitions and tours; all of which provided valuable curatorial insights and access to collectors and artists. This dual construct of accessibility and elitism finds good balance at Basel.

The fair was huge, taking up all floors of the exhibition centre, with Basel Miami Design featured across the way. Good walking shoes, a phone-camera, notebook and boundless stamina are all key ingredients when undertaking this art adventure. Besides traversing the many aisles, there are also many gallery codes — in fact, many galleries, and just so very much to see. In all, at least 290 galleries from 35 countries participated in Art Basel 2018, which ran from June 11 to 16.

Art Basel has a few components. Here is a quick guide:

EDITIONS — This provides a platform for the prints/editions/series market and was of particular interest to me because SGFA Advisory (www.shaliniganendra.com) is hosting an editions project exploring the practice in Malaysian art. The field of prints and editions is very technical. To simplify, however, the best case is to have small editions (single digit), signed by the creator, of art quality and preferably with use of the human hand (examples are lithograph, etching and silkscreen).

Also of great interest was Matthew Barney's four Woodburytypes, a 19th-century photomechanical technique involving the printing of photographic images from lead moulds using hot gelatin ink. Barney has further transformed the image by growths of electroformed copper gilded with nickel and 24-carat gold.

FEATURE and STATEMENTS — These two sectors, featuring 31 and 18 projects respectively, are discovery arenas, giving those galleries a chance to be present at Basel, although they may not have been eligible for the main fair. Statements covers emerging talent while Feature had a mix of less exposed works by established artists (such as Alex Katz, Rachel Whiteread and Irving Penn) and new, though not necessarily young, artists.

What caught my eye was a series by Salvatore Emblema at Galleria Fonti. *Transparency*, which featured six large Indigo on Jute canvases with a Rothko aesthetic, was created by the late Italian artist in the 1970s. Emblema (born in 1929) experimented to develop his concept of transparency.

UNLIMITED — Located in a dedicated building, this was again curated by Gianni Jetzer, curator-at-large for the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Presenting a wide range of works that went beyond the context of the stand, Unlimited, which featured 71 projects this year, is Basel's platform for large-scale installations and sculptures, projected video works, live performances and anything else that cannot be contained within a typical art fair booth. This year, the projects spanned the breadth of these media and formats, with new video works, performance works, both new and old, and large-scale installations.

KUNSTHALLE + KUNSTMUSEUM BASEL — The offerings outside the fair proved to be as exciting as the event itself, giving and indeed allowing for quieter moments of view and engagement.

At Kunsthalle Basel, Turner Prize nominee Luke Willis Thompson presented an unusual performance piece involving film, piano, haunting sounds and presence. Titled *Human*, the single three-minute, 35mm silent film projection is "strange and luminous...appears for just a few fleeting frames and then blackness". Showing close-ups of skin, held up by dressmaker's pins in monumental structures — visuals were architectural and curious. It is dense in meaning, "at once personal and universal, and is by turns a sumptuous document, devoted homage, art historical resurrection, portrait, self-portrait and biting manifesto", as the catalogue exclaims. Thompson, who is of African descent and hails from New Zealand, clearly grapples with the history of racism being closely linked to skin colour.

Kunstmuseum Basel offered a traditional collection of European Modernist works, the best of which was the stunning set of stained glass windows by Chagall, a permanent architectural fixture at the entrance.

FONDATION BEYELER — Further afield was the gem, Fondation Beyeler, which featured the acclaimed Giacometti & Bacon exhibition, marking the first time



An Ai Weiwei chandelier installation at Uli and Rita Sigg's castle



Sudarsham Shetty at Art Basel 2018

the two artists were featured together. Fondation Beyeler is also, to the delight of architectural enthusiasts, housed in a Renzo Piano building. Quiet corners. Human scale. Visitors relaxing on green lawns and in quiet interior space — reading, viewing and resting — alone or together.

Founder Ernst Beyeler (1921-2010) was a Swiss art dealer and collector who became "Europe's pre-eminent dealer in modern art", according to *The New York Times*. The foundation's collections encompass over 260 works — selectively featured across 19 galleries. Sited in extensive grounds and boasting a sculpture garden featuring works by Jenny Holzer and Alexander Calder, the building's minimalist architecture marries space and natural light, illuminating artworks to a level of spirituality.

The galleries juxtapose sculptures against canvases so beautifully that it is at once fantastically memorable yet edifying. These two artists were outstanding representatives of classic Modernism. Though producing very different aesthetic at first glance, the exhibition attempts to connect similarities, as both manifestly sought to depict human existence in all its facets, including its abysmal side. Large-screen video interviews with the two artists are

so informative, as is Bacon's flirtation with his male interviewer.

SCHAULAGER — In contrast was the more industrial and large-scale encounter at Schaulager - Laurenz Foundation, with Bruce Nauman's *Disappearing Acts*, an extensive retrospective of the eminent artist's works. Nauman (born in 1941) has a practice that spans a broad range of media, including sculpture, neon, photography, video, drawing, printmaking and performance. The show featured hugely the videos he made between 1966 and 1970, in which the American used his body to explore the potentials of art and the role of the artist, and to investigate psychological states and behavioural codes. One of his dealers, Angela Westwater, an acquaintance and herself an Art Basel gallerist, joined our group, describing Nauman as "laconic".

ULI & RITA SIGG COLLECTION TOUR — A highlight of this Basel experience was the Tate private viewing of the Uli & Rita Sigg collection housed in an idyllic 17th-century castle situated on an island, about an hour's drive from Basel.

"A man's home is his castle" takes on a literal meaning here, where the framework offered extensive opportunity for living with art. Art is everywhere — in the bathrooms, kitchen and bedrooms — in addition to public spaces. Uli's study furniture was designed by close friend Ai Weiwei. We were treated to an extensive tour by Uli through all the rooms, including the attic. The afternoon concluded with a practice run of a performance piece by a Chinese artist. Involving a ballet dancer, a mule and a quartet, the piece was to open later that evening.

And then it was a wrap for me too. From the art fair itself to the museums, private collections and the realised vision of critical foundations as well as memories of the wonderful frothy cappuccinos at the Market Square, Basel was not only visually stimulating and informing but also truly an experience of seeing the bigger picture. I say this literally as well as metaphorically. **E**

Shalini Ganendra is an art adviser whose career spans more than 20 years, extending to individual and institutional projects. She visited Art Basel as a member of the Tate Gallery Acquisitions Committee and is herself a recognised collector of contemporary and modern art and design.