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FRIEZE ART FAIR WEEKEND 15-16 OCTOBER 2011

## Trends

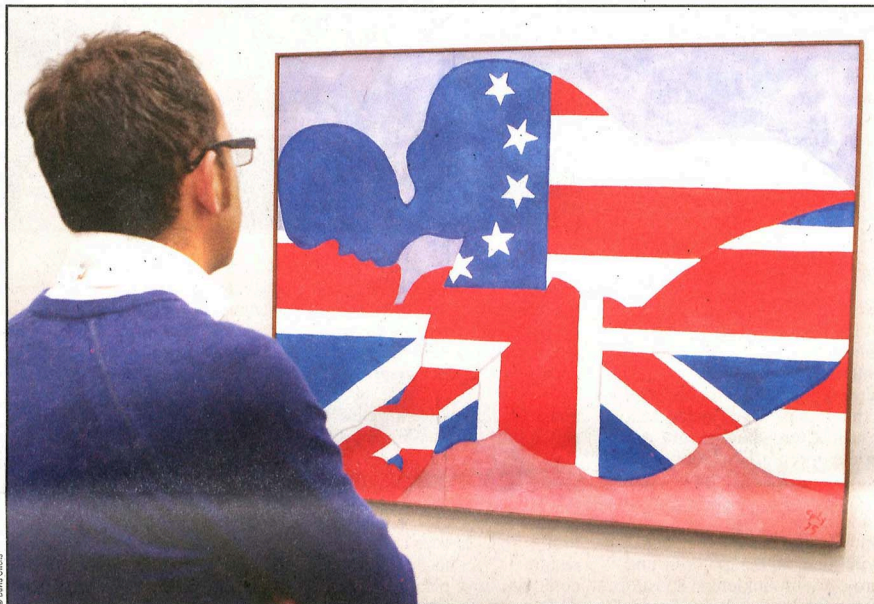
# Never mind the politics

*Is it artists or art fairs that are shying away from overtly confrontational work?*

LONDON. As Spain's credit rating is downgraded, President Obama squares up to Iran and rebel fighters in Libya close in on pro-Gaddafi troops in the city of Sirte, Frieze appears to exist on an altogether more serene plane. After a decade of the "war on terror", there are very few works in the fair that reflect overtly our turbulent times. But opinion is divided on whether this leafy cocoon in Regent's Park is detached from world events because of the demands of business—politically challenging work is typically harder to sell—or because artists, in the West at least, are not engaging with current affairs.

The handful of dealers who are showing works directly related to contemporary issues and events stand out, including Dubai's The Third Line (H11), which is presenting works that refer to the Arab Spring. Moscow's XL Gallery (D1) has brought "Resistance", 1991-2011, a series of eight photographs priced €2,000 each by Igor Moukhin of protestors clashing with police in Moscow.

All of the works available from the Beirut-based Galerie Sfeir-Semler (G11) are politically charged. Rabih Mroué's *Je Veux Voir*, 2011, a mixed-media installation priced at €30,000, features a video in which French film star Catherine Deneuve wanders through a semi-ruined Lebanese town that was attacked by Israeli forces in 2006. "I can't imagine being a Lebanese gallery and not working with artists who don't look around them and take in the world," says Andrée Sfeir-Semler, the gallery's director. She says that the gallery attracts "serious collectors who are not just interested in art as a decorative element".



Paul Kasmin Gallery (G2) is showing William Copley's *My Motherland Can Fuck Your Fatherland*, 1975

"The fair seems surprisingly polite and disassociated from the world we live in," says Paul Kasmin of the eponymous gallery (G2). His booth is one of the few to feature overtly political works, including the striking *My Motherland Can Fuck Your*

**“Biennials in Venice and Istanbul are political”**

*Fatherland* (\$125,000), 1975, by William Copley, which shows an early version of the American flag and the Union Jack locked together in physical union.

This year's Frieze features "a lot more decorative and abstract work than normal", says Alex Logsdail, associate director of Lisson Gallery (B9). It has sold work by the Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei, who spent three months in prison earlier this year and continues to defy the Chinese government. Logsdail says that "in times of struggle, people like things that make them feel better".

Some dealers may well be nervous about showing political pieces for fear that they will put off potential collectors. Matthew

Slotover, co-director of Frieze, says: "You could make a case for there being a political work on every stand," but that art fairs attract a different crowd to the "mass" audiences drawn to biennials such as Venice and Istanbul (both of which have many political works, albeit, in the case of Venice, in the national pavilions). "Galleries [at the fair] are thinking about a more sophisticated audience—they don't have to shout," he says.

It's all about the context in which the art is being shown, apparently. "Most collectors prefer less political works, and the galleries in art fairs thus line up their more formal, often colourful works with that in mind. There are galleries working with art informed by politics, but in a fair such as Frieze, they tend to get engulfed by the rest," says Adriano Pedrosa, co-curator of the Istanbul Biennial (until 13 November). However, as Pedrosa says: "One cannot distinguish simply between art fairs and biennials, as the reality is much more complex and nuanced."

That reality relies on the artists themselves, who produce the content for fairs and biennials alike. "There is a lot less political art all round. More and more artists are

choosing not to deal with political issues; they're thinking instead about their own personal situations," says Joseph Backstein, the Russian curator. *I Am Protesting*

*Against Myself*, 2011, is a video piece by Romanian artist Ciprian Muresan and dramatist Gianina Carbanariu that features a puppet in a bin asking passers-by to join his protest against himself, and is a comment on artists' passivity, says Mihai Pop, the director of Romania's Galeria Plan B (H9). Pop says the work, on sale for €6,000, is about society's failure to protest.

Politics need not be overt, and many artists are avoiding didacticism, says Sarah McCrory, the curator of Frieze Projects, who points to a video installation by this year's Emdash prize winner, Anahita Razmi. *Roof Piece Tehran*, 2011, was inspired by choreographer Trisha Brown and shows how demonstrators mounted Tehran's rooftops to oppose the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the president of Iran in 2009.

Polemics aside, however, a US dealer who wished to remain anonymous cut to the chase, saying: "Art is, to a degree, unreal. It's a fantasy land." And, he says, given the volatility of the global economy, "people need to park their cash somewhere." ■

**Charlotte Burns and Gareth Harris**