

Frieze Is Selling a Fantasy of Los Angeles

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Trulee Hall, "Infestation" (2019) at the Paramount Studios back lot (all photos by Elisa Wouk Almino/Hyperallergic)

LOS ANGELES — Rapper and actor Edison Chen, who made his Hollywood debut playing the child version of a gangster-aligned police force mole, likes to spend the morning on Abbot Kinney in Venice, at “an ingeniously curated gift shop” called Burro. Or so he told *Frieze magazine*, for one of its many romanticized lead-ups to the inaugural Frieze Los Angeles art fair. Chen’s recs were used to piece together the ideal LA day: pre-lunch basketball at Pan Pacific Park on the Westside, lunch at Hoy-Ka in East Hollywood, then a dash over to the Huntington Gardens. Then spend the night at a Lakers game, followed by dinner at pricey Bestia on the fringes of the Arts District. For an onscreen caper, shot perhaps with the help of helicopters, this day could be made to seem smooth and pleasant. For a normal person, it requires, at minimum, three hours in a car; public transport makes it near impossible.

Frieze is selling a fantasy of Los Angeles, perhaps a good strategy in a city whose sprawl and competing cultural identities have kept it from building the kind of collecting culture old world and old money cities have. That it might work out (“impressive sales within the first few moments,” read Friday morning’s press release, as all such releases do) makes it no less cringe-inducing.

Bettina Korek, the executive director of Frieze Los Angeles and founder of the amorphous arts organization ForYourArt, said in another pre-Frieze pitch piece that the fair brings together “the world’s leading galleries” and “Los Angeles’s defining art spaces to celebrate our city’s position as a global arts center and destination.” This fair, in other words, is both in and about Los Angeles — and while the New York and London editions certainly take on some silly promotion strategies, this one is reserved for us (because “celebrate Manhattan’s position as an arts center” sounds like farce).

The fair opened Thursday, February 14, on the Paramount Studios lot (also the setting of the short-lived Paris Photo LA). All the galleries share space in a well-constructed, all-white tent — “a bespoke tent,” Korek called it at a January press conference — designed by architect Kulapat Yantrasast, who designs LA’s art world these days (the Marciano Foundation, the ICA Los Angeles, Kordansky Gallery). The artist’s projects play out across the Paramount Backlot, in fake skyscrapers, townhomes, bars, and the like. “It’s a set for a real city and it’s this very powerful symbol of LA’s unique creative ecosystem,” said Korek at the press conference.

Funnily, the “real city” the set imitates is New York. This brings to mind Thom Andersson’s film essay *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, especially his gripe about Hollywood’s “betrayal of its native city,” by always portraying it as something it’s not. Here, it’s a metropolis with brownstones and walking paths filled with art and creative retail.





Bombay Sapphire Bar at the backlot of the Paramount Pictures Studios

Over a third of the galleries featured at Frieze Los Angeles have local spaces, and many, both from here and elsewhere, feature LA-centered programming — at Kordansky's booth, Kathryn Andrews installed work informed by the famed Black Dahlia case (which is fiercer, sleeker, and cooler than the press materials citing it as "LA noir"). Hauser & Wirth has an installation by Mike Kelley, "shown for the first time in LA, exactly 20 years since its inception, in the city where it was conceived," as described in another *Frieze* piece heralding all the LA that would be on view in LA. But mostly this LA-centrism bleeds into the fair aesthetic, which flattens everything into commodity — Blum & Poe's Dave Muller Hollywood mural, painted across all the booth's walls, is kitschily self-referential, and Sprüth Mager's huge Barbara Kruger all but expected, while most of the LA artists don't immediately read as particularly LA. This inevitable art fair homogenization perhaps necessitated Frieze LA's strong rhetoric.

"In our city, art isn't an afterthought," tweeted Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti on Thursday, along with photos of himself at the fair's opening. "We're a town that nurtures artists [...]" (Someone promptly tweeted back, "artists can't afford to live here.") He'd said the exact same thing to *The Hollywood Reporter* for the same article about the fair in which dealer and former museum director Jeffrey Deitch remembered Maurice Marciano telling him "The LA art community now has everything [...] — the only thing it doesn't have is a major international art fair."

In our city, art isn't an afterthought, it's part of who we are. We're a town that nurtures artists, creators and innovators. Thrilled to welcome the [#FriezeArtFair](#) to Los Angeles, celebrating contemporary artists. [#FriezeLA pic.twitter.com/LF2iAPZiEV](#)

— Mayor Eric Garcetti (@MayorOfLA) [February 15, 2019](#)

Whether it “has everything” depends very much on who one asks. In 2012, in the early days of the art scene expansion that has played out since, cultural historian Sarah Schrank [pointed out](#) that “Los Angeles has a long history of censoring, neglecting, and mishandling art and artists. The reasons include Los Angeles’ history of boosterism and self-congratulatory image-making [...]” It’s worth noting that the Department of Cultural Affairs’ 2016 [Current:LA](#) biennial, a site-specific series of installations, disproportionately featured artists represented by established galleries and museums — art that looks a lot like art from elsewhere. It’s also worth noting that boosterish verbiage, like that used by Frieze organizers and public officials, played a key role in stoking the anger of anti-gentrification protesters, who saw in gallerists’ and journalists’ rhetoric an erasure of marginalized, or just different, communities and cultures.



Most of the programs associated with Frieze probe this city’s art world too: Jim Shaw talks about his record collection; Rafa Esparza talks to Ron Athey. Program director Hamza Walker, who explained at the press conference that he’d said he “would never do

an art fair, but this is the exception," views this programming as "an opportunity for a community to understand itself *as such*." He's asked the speakers to "act as if though audience isn't there" during their talks. "In my own experiences the best conversations never had an audience," he said. This is well meaning, and maybe will result in some pleasant naturalism, but amidst Frieze's wave of boosterism, ignoring the audience seems a bit foreboding.

The projects on the backlot "kind of bring art to the center of this city," said Korek, who hoped they would "help people imagine what our city would be like if that were the case." She also hoped the "energy from Paramount really emanates throughout the city." It would probably be better if the energy from the wider and unwieldy city more thoroughly infected Paramount, sort of like artist Trulee Hall's impressive papier-mâché serpent, which rises out of a fake backlot subway and eagerly wraps itself in and around a dark tenement building.

Frieze Los Angeles continues at the Paramount Pictures Studios (5515 Melrose Ave, Los Angeles) through Sunday, February 17.