

The Art Market **Collecting**

Art Basel fair's physical return lifts spirits – and sales

Salvator Mundi dealer claims victory; Frida Kahlo work aims for record; Thaddaeus Ropac gallery hires head of Asia; Ben Nicholson acquisition for Hepworth Wakefield



Continuing travel restrictions helped presales for some at Art Basel 2021 © Art Basel

Melanie Gerlis SEPTEMBER 23 2021

Spirits were high at this week's opening of [Art Basel](#), the first edition of the Swiss fair since the pandemic struck. The last-minute news that the Swiss Federal Council had reconsidered and approved the AstraZeneca vaccine for entrance to the fair came too late for some — including me — but made the processes smoother and improved the vibe, according to those on the ground.

As expected, the number of visitors from Asia and the US is down, but there are plenty of seasoned collectors and museum representatives from Europe, dealers say. Continuing travel restrictions have even increased the pace of presales for some. “The people who couldn't come were worried that works would go, it was a bit crazy,” noted London gallerist Sadie Coles before the event's physical opening on Tuesday.



An untitled piece by Dan Flavin from 1974 that sold for \$3m © Stephen Flavin/Artists Rights Society/David Zwirner



Elmgreen & Dragset's 'The Outsiders' (2020) caused a stir at Art Basel © Sebastiano Pellion di Persano/Pace

Talk of the fair, which runs until Sunday, is a vintage Mercedes-Benz, with a Russian number plate, parked outside the halls and in which two silicone, highly realistic male art handlers sleep together. Titled “The Outsiders” (2020), it is the work of artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset ([Pace](#) gallery, \$365,000). Postwar works of note include an early, jazzy work by Robert Ryman (“Untitled”, c1963, \$28m) and a majestic 1974 work in pink fluorescent light by Dan Flavin, which sold from the Unlimited section for large-scale art for \$3m (both David Zwirner gallery).

In general, exhibitors have opted for less pricey pieces — a strategy that seems to be working, with a slew of sales reported early. Art adviser Bona Montagu said: “People were pleasantly surprised on day one. There was a lot of smiling behind those face masks.”
