

How a Swiss symbol still keeps its fizz

The megalith of art fairs, Art Basel, opens this week with some tricks up its sleeve to enliven the market, says *Colin Gleadell*

The heat is on as collectors and museum curators, critics and journalists, gallerists, art advisors, analysts and auctioneers from all over the world gather in Switzerland this week for Art Basel, the biggest art fair and networking event in the calendar. The event is carefully thought out to represent the galleries and artists who are either the most important historically, or are thought to be the most interesting and stimulating today.

For the first time since 2009, though, Art Basel takes place against a backdrop of uncertainty. After the major auctions in London and New York at which sales levels fell sharply from previous years, the mood is expected to be nervous. So will participants be cracking bottles of champagne after the opening day to celebrate important sales, or doing so just to keep their spirits up?

There will, I suspect, be a bit of both. Certainly a flurry of sales announcements from the bigger galleries such as Hauser & Wirth – boasting a \$7 million (£4.9 million) David Smith sculpture – Lisson, Victoria Miro, Sprueth Magers, David Zwirner and Thaddaeus Ropac can be expected. All have worked hard to set up sales in the past few weeks

and can afford press agencies to make announcements in the first two days.

Basel always provides a fabulous journey through the “isms” of the 20th century (cubism, futurism, expressionism, and so on) with more and more rediscovered areas – the post-war “Zero” or “Gutai” groups for instance – explored as the masterpieces of 20th-century art become rarer in the market. Still, the roll-call of market favourites – Warhol, Koons, Baselitz, Kapoor – is tediously insistent. Upstairs is the riskiest sector, where younger generation artists have been churning out new products for their dealers – few of which are under £25,000.

Recently, though, there has been more of an emphasis on older art, even among the galleries associated with the new, partly, I suspect, because more buyers are feeling safer with a work they can position within an artist's total output, rather than risking outlay on a new work by an artist whose future is anything but secure.

In an interview last week, Art Basel's director, Marc Spiegler, said the fair was not about trend-spotting, pointing to the amount of historical material in it. He referred particularly to the expanded “Feature” section of the fair, where galleries that are not regular



Jim Shaw's *Champagne Wishes and Caviar Dreams*, shown by Simon Lee at Art Basel

exhibitors there apply to make displays that in some way enliven our readings of recent art history, and are relevant to what is being made today.

Among the exhibitors in the Feature section is Sprovieri, a gallery that has been around for a long time, quietly making interesting shows in London, but has never broken into the ranks of Art Basel before. It also represents three artists – Chelva Ferro, Jannis Kounellis and Pedro Cabrita Reis – who are making installations in the Art Unlimited section, reserved for outsize works, as well as Ilya Kabakov, the Russian conceptualist who has been selected to make a sculpture as part of Art Basel's “Parcours” commissions for art in the city.

For Niccolo Sprovieri, this exposure is a major breakthrough. “I have waited 16 years for this,” he says. “Five years ago, art fairs were recognised as

important for galleries to do business. Now there are too many, most of them with a heavily regional bias. Basel, though, is the best; it's number one.”

For his Feature exhibition he has taken as his theme Malevich's influential suprematist text, *Non-Objective World*, and how its aesthetic persists through the work of British conceptual artists Art & Language, in the Sixties, and Kabakov, 40 years later. The concept for the show was developed in collaboration with Jill Silverman van Coenegrachts, a private dealer and curator who, like Sprovieri, has worked with these artists in the past.

Bringing in galleries such as Sprovieri helps to shake things up a bit, and that's no bad thing with a megalith like Art Basel, which needs constant change to keep itself in that number one position.