



Faculty of Art

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## Frieze Art Fair, London

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## Canadian Art INTERNATIONAL

### Frieze Art Fair, London

Sitting on a bench in a children's park outside the Frieze Art Fair, taking a well-deserved break, I am suddenly confused. Am I still inside the fair? I can't help but think of Jean Baudrillard's essay *The Conspiracy of Art*, in which he describes art's proliferation in terms of overabundance ending in nothing, what he terms "null." Hearing the shrill voices of children in the playground and a parent commenting "too much monkeying," it is hard to overlook the continuity of banal playfulness.

The Frieze Art Fair, one of the most prodigious of the current fairs (whose numbers seem to grow with every passing year), has been hailed, along with Charles Saatchi's championing of the YBAs, as significantly contributing to the revitalization of the British art scene over the past two decades. This year's Frieze is, as expected, exuberant, and in many ways demonstrates the ascendancy of the art market as the driving force in today's art world.

Inside the fair, the über-hip art dealer Gavin Brown presents a booth featuring a project by Rob Pruitt that epitomizes Frieze. The booth presents itself as a street fair, with the typical array of cheap trinkets for sale to all browsers in a recreation of the crowded, narrow corridors of a New York flea market. The difference is that this New York commercial gallery inserts these emblems of "the low" into one of the most exclusive and expensive of all art fairs: turn up your nose at high art inside the warm embrace of the commercial fair. The joke falls flat. Brown's intervention is not critique but rather a hubristic and silly presentation. The crowds that flock to his booth happily buy cheap multiples from young artists seated at messy, overcrowded tables. It is a joke, and its spirit runs like a contagious disease throughout a fair dominated by slapstick art.

The art world has become a carnival of abundance, crowded with students of an art liberalism born of Duchamp. The extent of the permissiveness of the moment is manifest in a project designed specifically for Frieze by the American artist Richard Prince, who presents, according to the exhibition catalogue, "a unique installation that is intended as simultaneously critical and laudatory of the art of commerce...in a work that challenges our preconceptions about art fairs, and proving that what you see is not necessarily what you get." Prince's contribution is a shiny yellow car on a rotating dais at the centre of the fair. Rotating with the car (a '69 Charger) is a Rubenesque, full-breasted woman dressed in shorts, a trailer-trash imitator who smiles and poses as part of the display. Unequivocally, this is an expression of the emptiness of art—not just American art, but the whole global system. Prince's play on the car show brings his art full circle, the painted car hoods of his previous work now returned to the car and exhibited as a ready-made. It is another half-worked-out joke, more monkeying around. Baudrillard may now be deceased, but his theory of art's emptiness, of art as nullity, is clearly displayed in Prince's special project—which seems to amount to something less than the emperor's new clothes.

What is wrong here? Another example may help. Throughout Frieze, one confronts, in booth after booth, recent works by Thomas Ruff. They are large, out-of-focus, pixellated photographs of almost nothing. To construct a comparison: at PULSE London, a much quieter satellite fair taking place concurrently in the city, I find yet another new Ruff for sale. The difference is that here, the work is to be found in a far corner of the fair, in the booth of an Albuquerque gallery, Richard Levy Gallery. It's not displayed proudly or prominently, but is literally hanging in a storage area. When I ask the gallerist why the Ruff is half-hidden, she explains that her interest is in introducing her artists to a wider audience, and that Ruff has enough exposure without her. Where is the frantic capitalism of the main Frieze fair, where the first display one confronts upon entering is the supersized booth of the Lisson Gallery? Where are the masses moving slowly in zombie-shopper mode, like in George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*?

In a well-curated series of talks presented in conjunction with Frieze, the American critic

Installation view of Richard Prince's  
*Untitled (original)* (2007) at the  
Frieze Art Fair PHOTO POLLY BRADEN





Dave Hickey, best known for his glorification of ideas of beauty, hypothesizes that the most radical approach an artist can take in relation to the current moment's art-consumption frenzy is to "eschew fashion and opportunism, get sensitive and act serious." He is a provocateur, saying at one moment, "If you want to piss away money, the art world is the place to do it," and in the next speculating that "Exciting as this is, imagine how exciting the collapse will be."

In many ways the overexpanded art bubble has already collapsed. The Frieze fair epitomizes its obesity. In his keynote talk, the Belgian critic, academic and author of *Kant after Duchamp* Thierry de Duve, with his usual contradictory snobbery, professed himself "embarrassed by the invitation, by the context" (yet he still came and spoke), stating how he missed the "aesthetic wars of yore." He declared that he missed abstraction fighting figuration and minimalism fighting painting in our difficult and tragic but exciting time, where you can make art out of everything, in the post-

Duchampian "anything-is-allowed liberalism of contemporary art."

At Frieze I was disappointed not by the consumer frenzy I witnessed, but by something else I have come to expect from successful art fairs: their lack of any sense of critical commitment to art and artists. But what can one expect? There is no place here for an examination of Kant's "The Critique of Judgement." The art market and its corpulent child—the art fair—is not, to quote de Duve, "the place for intellectuals." Here there are no aesthetic wars, only the tragic comedy of mercantilism. As I heard muttered over and over again (even by intellectuals) at the fair, "This is fun, this is commerce," "There is nothing wrong with artists selling; they

have to survive” and “No one gets hurt in an art bubble but rich collectors and greedy artists.”

It makes one nostalgic for artists and art dealers who will emphatically declare: “I will make and show art I really believe in.” Or is this impossible when the singularity of the artwork has been lost in the global market’s suppression of aesthetic differentiation? We don’t have aesthetic wars in playgrounds, just fun and high-pitched laughter. by Eldon Garnet

## Rodney Graham

LISSON GALLERY, LONDON

Rodney Graham, who is well known for his portrayals of fictional characters in his films and photographs, has starred in those works as a shipwrecked pirate, a lonesome cowboy and even Cary Grant. In 2006, Graham created a Fluxus-style film, *Lobbing Potatoes at a Gong*, in which he played the part of an imaginary performance artist. From this character (he says) came “the idea

of a back-story [of] a decade of artistic exploration in various media. Naturally the artist started as a painter.”

For this exhibition, Graham has brought the invented yet archetypal character of “the gifted amateur” into the real world as the creator of a new body of paintings. In the front gallery window hang two enormous, stylized graphic artworks made of lacquer and wood, with puffed white frames surrounding squiggly black lines: a cartoon-like interpretation of abstraction. The idea for these pieces came, indeed, from a 1950s cartoon—a silkscreened version of which is hung nearby—in which two men stand before nearly identical works. One says, “If you ask me, his earlier paintings were much better.” Across the gallery hangs a new series of beautiful untitled, antique-framed, Picasso-esque paintings; their abstracted shapes refer to what is being lampooned in the cartoon.

A three-part light box measuring nine by 18 feet in the gallery’s second room anchors the show. In *The Gifted Amateur, Nov. 10th, 1962*, Graham plays the role of the painter, shown amid typical 1960s Vancouver decor, in the process of pouring bright slashes of paint down a raw canvas in the manner of the Abstract Expressionist Morris Louis, who passed away in 1962.

This is classic Graham—in character, inside an elaborate set that reads as both history and the present moment simultaneously. The Louis-influenced *Inverted Drip* paintings that appear upstairs are hung upside down, bringing to mind Graham’s inverted photographs of trees (for example *Flanders Trees* from 1989). Like the tree works, these solemn, jewel-toned ribbons of paint on raw canvas may be read as a reversal of growth, progress and time.

Graham is well known for throwing a loop into linear time—be it in the context of film (in his 1997 *Vexation Island*, a shipwrecked pirate is knocked out by a coconut, wakes and is knocked out again in a never-ending cycle) or literary narrative (in 1983’s *Lenz*, a piece of text is looped endlessly upon itself). Here, the conceptual loop occurs outside of the work itself, taking the viewer from the 1960s to the present-day work of a well-known Vancouver artist... by Andrea Carson

RODNEY GRAHAM *The Gifted Amateur, Nov. 10th, 1962* 2007 Backlit colour transparency (triptych) 2.85 m x 1.82 m x 17.8 cm each panel COURTESY THE ARTIST/LISSON GALLERY, LONDON © RODNEY GRAHAM, 2007

