

"Untitled Art Houston opens with a slew of four- and five-figure sales"

By Carlie Porterfield

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Visitors thronged the aisles of Untitled Art Houston at the George R. Brown Convention Center during the fair's VIP preview. Courtesy Untitled Art

Sales during the VIP preview of the inaugural Untitled Art Houston fair on Thursday (18 September) were uneven according to exhibitors, though lower-priced works in particular sold well. Curiosity about Houston and the city's first new fair in years has participating dealers feeling hopeful the event will help kickstart a new national appreciation for Space City's art scene.

Houston was previously home to two other now-defunct art fairs, the Houston Fine Art Fair and the Texas Contemporary Art Fair. The Houston Fine Art Fair came first, organised by Rick Friedman with Max Fishko on board as a consultant. The two had a falling out, according to the *Houston Chronicle*, and Fishko teamed up with Jeffrey Wainhouse to launch the Texas Contemporary Art Fair. Local dealers say the dueling fairs, held weeks apart, failed to work together to help build up the local art scene—but many Houstonians are optimistic about Untitled Art fair's entry into the market.

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"I was very sceptical in the beginning. My heart's been broken too many times with art fairs here," says longtime Houston dealer Robert McClain, whose McClain Gallery took part in the previous fairs as well as the inaugural Untitled Art Houston. "I've certainly been pleasantly surprised by the commitment of the fair organisers. This fair has been a catalyst for a number of collectors who have reached out to us who knew Untitled was happening. Just the excitement of it seemed to spur them to make decisions on buying other things."

McClain Gallery sold *Life on a Merry-Go-Round* (2010) by the Texas-born painter John Alexander for \$125,000 during the VIP preview to a Houston-based collector, according to the gallery. They also placed two paintings by Dorothy Hood, a pioneering Modernist Texas artist, for \$75,000 each. Houston has always had a strong market for primary material by artists from the region, McClain adds.



Swan Mother (2022) by Clare Rojas at Jessica Silverman's stand. Courtesy Untitled Art

The Houston-based gallery Sicardi Ayers Bacino reported the most valuable transaction of the fair so far, a work by Carlos Cruz-Diez that sold for \$415,000.

The San Francisco-based gallery Jessica Silverman placed an edition of Clare Rojas's figurative bronze sculpture *Swan Mother* (2022) for \$150,000, according to the gallery. The work is featured in the fair's Special Presentations section. At the gallery's stand, it reported selling a 2025 acrylic-on-cardboard work by Andrea Bowers for \$38,000, *Infinite Cat's Whispers* (2025) by Masako Miki for \$20,000, as well as *Equilibrium (C.9)* (2025) by Beverly Fishman for \$55,000 and three editions of a 2025 tapestry by Rupy C. Tut for \$20,000 each.

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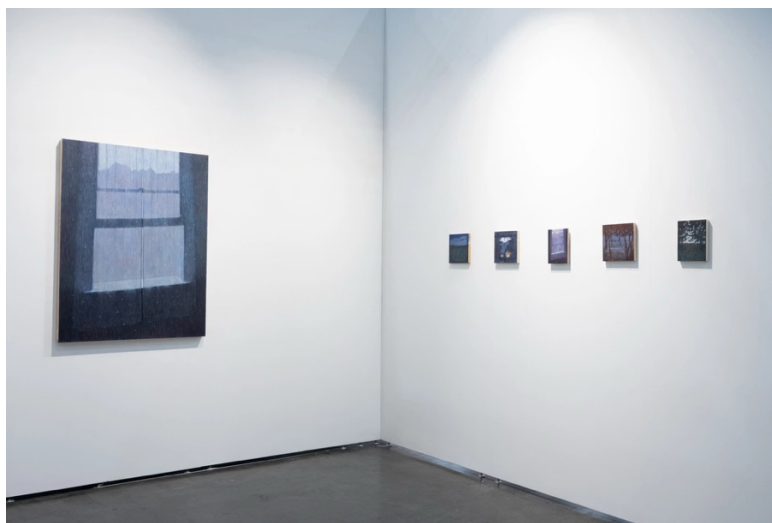
Philip Martin Gallery from Los Angeles says it sold a painting by Sky Glabush for \$25,000, while Stems gallery, first founded in Brussels, sold a Olivier Souffrant painting for \$24,000. The Manhattan-based dealer Hollis Taggart sold three paintings by Tim Kent; one for \$32,000, and the other two for \$12,000 each.

The Los Angeles-based gallery Megan Mulrooney sold out its stand of paintings by TJ Rinoski and Mason Owens, priced between \$2,500 and \$6,000, and \$2,000 and \$8,500, respectively, according to the gallery. Just two weeks ago, the gallery had a similarly successful outing at The Armory Show in New York, selling out its stand of works by the San Antonio-born artist Piper Bangs. (Last week, the gallery opened a solo show at its Hollywood headquarters dedicated to the Austin-based painter RF. Alvarez.)

"I've always been a Texas fan. I show a lot of Texan artists," Megan Mulrooney says. "I had always had really great connections with collectors here in Houston, as well as great art advisers, which I think is key to the city. There are serious collectors here who go to all the fairs. So it really made [Houston] a destination that I was really interested in."

The Houston-based gallery Seven Sisters reported selling two mixed-media paintings by Daniel Rios Rodriguez during the VIP preview. One went to Bay Area collectors for \$7,000, the other to a Houstonian collection, via a local art adviser, for \$6,500. The gallery says it also sold a work by the Houston-based sculptor Jamie Sterling Pitt for \$2,800.

Time for a holistic look at Houston



Megan Mulrooney's stand at Untitled Art Houston. Courtesy Untitled Art

The new fair "feels really vibrant, like all the usual suspects are out, but also a really great selection of regional curators", says Seven Sisters director Erin Dorn. "Having just come off the heels of [The Armory Show], a lot of curators and auction house people from Los Angeles and New York are curious about how this will unfold. That curiosity is beginning a lot of interesting conversations, and enthusiasm for a more holistic look at the Houston art scene."

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Dealers across the board cited Houston's diversity as a strength for its art scene, allowing artists to access a broad array of influences. Many also said the city's wide range of creative exhibition spaces and notorious lack of zoning laws makes it easier to create and show unconventional work here.

"You can open something and maybe not have all the planning or permits that you need to (in other cities)," Dorn says. "It's that kind of wildcatter thing that Texas is known for, right? You build it and then you apologise later. A lot of business people in Houston have that confidence."

The Houstonian art adviser Lea Weingarten called the city "a beautifully kept secret".

"People stereotype us as being a typical southern city, but we have gems like the Menil Collection, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and we have a kunsthalle in the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston," she says. "As a cultural destination, we're one of the few cities in the country that has symphony, ballet, theatre and museums."

But a part of Houston's "secret sauce" is its ability to attract strong, emerging talents thanks to a plethora of diverse venues to exhibit, a strong philanthropy scene that is supportive of artists and a more affordable cost of living compared to coastal art hubs like New York and Los Angeles, Weingarten says. Houston's art market has also been able to weather the global art market downturn relatively well, perhaps aided by the region's diverse economy, she says.

"Here in Texas, we've really been strong, we've never really had that dip. And in terms of why people come here, I think that they're sensing the market," Weingarten says. "People are spending money. They are building houses, they are paying architects, they're paying interior designers and they're paying art advisers, which means that we are able to support them."



Guardians of Stories and Land (2025) by Joya Mukerjee Logue. Courtesy Rajiv Menon Contemporary

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Rajiv Menon, who grew up in the Houston area before founding [his eponymous gallery](#) dedicated to South Asian artists in Los Angeles, says he sold a large-scale painting by Joya Mukerjee Logue to a Texas-based collector for \$30,000, as well as seven paintings by Mustafa Mohsin ranging in price from \$1,200 to \$10,000.

Programming the perfect party

The fair's director, Michael Slenske, was tasked with organising the fair's exhibitors, landing on 88 dealers from 22 countries, with nearly one quarter hailing from Texas. This year's participants range from established New York City galleries headquartered in Chelsea to young, scrappy Houston dealers.

"You want an art fair to have the curation of a good party," Slenske says. "You don't want everyone to be at the same level, and you don't want everyone to be from the same place. You want people to come here and find new things, so it's about discovery."

Colector, a gallery hailing from Monterrey, Mexico with spaces in Dallas and Houston, sold nine works on paper by the local artist Angelbert Metoyer for \$7,000 each. The series of 14 works featured on the gallery's stand was commissioned specially for the fair to "give the opportunity for new collectors to grasp", says Jesús Alberto Flores, the gallery's director.

Overall, Untitled Art Houston exhibitors bringing more affordable works and smaller pieces reported a higher volume of sales. This dynamic aligns with the findings of the most recent edition of the *Art Market Report* published by Art Basel and UBS, which found that sales of works priced under \$50,000 increased by 8% year-on-year in 2024, despite overall global sales of art dropping by 12% over the same period. However, not all dealers reported successful sales during Thursday's preview; some said the fair's layout, designed with twists and turns to encourage visitors to explore all the stands, kept some attendees from visiting the exhibitors placed in the back. Others said they had relied on remote sales arranged before the fair to move inventory and were not as successful in-person during the VIP preview. Dealers were hopeful sales would continue over the weekend, not unlike the slow burn pace that's typical down the road at the Dallas Art Fair.

The Untitled Art fair's founder Jeff Lawson first started looking at Houston for an expansion as far back as 2013, but he and Slenske began seriously sizing up the city in preparation for the fair three years ago. The art market was in a very different place then.

"It makes us a lot more sensitive to the galleries' needs, to talk with them more, to work with them closely, to really listen to what it is that they need, and do the best that we can to support them," Lawsons says of the downturn in the market since the speculative boom of 2021.

Slenske says the plan is to hold the fair again next year in the same venue, the George R. Brown Convention Center downtown, and help build up the city's infrastructure.

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"This is an artist's town more than any place in Texas," Slenske says. "It's the last city of this scale to not have an art week, and I think that's an oversight. The level of curators and artists in this city could stack up against a lot of art capitals."

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