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Bidding for stability in a time of uncertain values

By Georgina Adam

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The art market is still alive. That was the relieved verdict of the dealers and collectors who braved the snow in London this week to watch Sotheby's and Christie's hold the first Impressionist and Modern art sales of the season. The auctions were an acid test for the art market, which has been battered by the continuing financial crisis: the last sales in this category, held in New York last November, showed a severely weakened market.

Sotheby's sale was the weaker in size (just 29 lots, of which 22 found buyers); in value (it made £32.56m) and in quality, despite some bright spots. These included a new world record auction price given by a Japanese buyer for Degas' "Petite Danseuse de Quatorze Ans" (a bronze cast from 1922), which made £13.26m, and a double-estimate £2m paid by the Nahmad family of dealers for Miró's large, colourful "Femmes et Oiseaux dans la Nuit" (1968).

Christie's stronger session the following evening offered 47 lots and totalled £63.43m, with just eight lots unsold. Among the standouts were a colourful group of portraits by Van Dongen, which did well, and some Impressionist paintings, including the cover lot, Monet's light-flecked 1876 portrait of his wife Camille reading in a field. "Dans la Prairie" was estimated at about £15m but sold well under that, for £11.24m, reflecting a market shift away from classic Impressionism and towards more modernist works.

Both sales were helped by the weak pound; in the case of the Degas dancer at Sotheby's, the Japanese buyer would have saved 35 per cent on his purchase, compared to last year's exchange rate. "The pound dropping was super, super helpful," said Christie's Thomas Seydoux. He also said that estimates had been considerably lowered: in the case of the Van Dongens, by 30 to 40 per cent compared to last July.

Does this mean that the market has now stabilised? No one was prepared to say. "The sales showed, as always, that if you bring good, fresh material at the right price to the market, it will do well," said art adviser Jorg Michael Bertz. And as Seydoux put it: "This is a transitional period, and we don't have a crystal ball."

Here is an interesting little story about Kirchner's "Street Scene" (1913, pictured top right), which sold at Sotheby's on its low estimate for £5.42m on Tuesday. The back of the work, which bears an angular portrait of art historian Botho Gräf, was originally the front. Left in the artist's studio on his death, the painting had the estate stamp put on the street scene, which was then the back. But by 1997, when the work sold at Sotheby's (for £1.98m), it had been reversed, thus joining the group of paintings of colourful Berlin streetwalkers for which Kirchner is renowned. **Hotel Gallery in London** was originally a non-commercial art space tucked upstairs in a nondescript building in the East End, the home of founders Darren Flook and Christabel Stewart, who lived there and offered lodging to artists while they were preparing their projects. But word quickly spread about the gallery, and within two years Hotel had been accepted for London's Frieze contemporary art fair - quite an accolade for such a laid-back operation.

Now Hotel is moving into a new gallery in Whitechapel, and, says Flook, "I will at last have a normal life, and go somewhere else to work instead of just going downstairs." He has found a large space in an old garment factory, ideally placed close to the Whitechapel Art Gallery, which is reopening to the public on April 5. The new Hotel opens on February 20 with paintings by Michael Bauer; meanwhile, another Hotel artist, David Noonan, is currently featured in the Tate Triennale's new show, *Altermodernism* (continues until April 26). **London has a new venue for** art fairs: an underground space that was once the flower market at Covent Garden, and it's a surprising success, being spacious and yet quite cosy.

The Watercolours and Drawings fair is being held there until tomorrow. The event has a loyal following of watercolour collectors, but has broadened by adding contemporary art and photography. Alongside traditional seascapes and flower studies, there are, for instance, photographs of books from the Coutts archive (by

Veronica Bailey, in editions from £950 to £13,500) or prints of Japanese ceramics by Daniel Kelly from £700 to £3,900. And it is instructive to visit the loan exhibition *Crisis? What Crisis?* displaying newspaper cartoons (pictured left) from this and other economic meltdowns. **"The art market is less ethical than the stock market"** was the motion proposed at an Intelligence Squared debate held in New York this week.

The audience was polled before the debate, and was pretty evenly split between "for", "against" and "undecided". But at the end of the debate, more than half the audience supported the motion, swayed by the "for" presentations of dealers Richard Feigen and Michael Hue-Williams and collector Adam Lindemann.

On the "against" line-up were artist Chuck Close, critic Jerry Saltz and Christie's Amy Cappellazzo, who defended auctions as "the only area that's regulated and in fact, the entire market is Byzantine. And the only little glimmer of transparency comes when you watch a live auction and watch something trade in real time."

She later added, to laughter: "You know, I'm not sure someone walks into Feigen Gallery and has a fabulous experience of transparency when they're told what the price is on something."

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