



Source: The Courtauld Institute of Art/Geoff Crawford

A gallery at the Courtauld Institute of Art

ART SCENE

Despite the current economic climate, London's art scene is thriving. We explore the major developments taking place in the city's galleries.

London is one of the world's busiest cities, with a rich tradition of painting stretching back to the Renaissance. But, at the same time, it is a blank canvas. The vibrancy and diversity of Britain's capital has always inspired artists towards reinterpretation and invention, which is one reason why it is Europe's biggest art centre and the second largest in the world after New York.

While many people feel the New York art scene is becoming more corporate and predictable, London has retained and strengthened its reputation for producing cutting-edge artists, taught by some of the best

tutors in the world's most prestigious art schools.

Institutions like the University of Arts London, the Royal College of Art and Goldsmiths, University of London have been fine-tuning the skills of world-renowned painters such as Lucian Freud, Bridget Riley and David Hockney for decades.

Some of these schools have departments dedicated to painting, a media that is still very much in fashion. Richard Noble, head of the department of art at Goldsmiths, comments, "Painting remains a profoundly important art form. It is also, without doubt, one of the most difficult media to work in, given

the weight of the tradition painters must carry.”

London has always attracted international painters and continues to draw artists from all over the world. The city’s art schools have a high ratio of international students, and relish the creativity that can develop when different cultures are brought together. “Visual art is a global phenomenon,” continues Richard. “It is crucially important to our students that they come into contact with students from different artistic traditions. This broadens their minds and on the whole makes them more interesting artists.”

The painter Eemyun Kang grew up in Korea and came to London to study fine art at the Slade School of Fine Art at University College London. “London is a very exciting place for artists,” she explains. “It is a global city, which makes the world seem smaller, but you also get the sense that people’s cultures are quite distinct from each other.”

This international atmosphere affected Eemyun’s work. “Before I started my BA at the Slade, my paintings were influenced by calligraphy and Korean landscape paintings. While I was studying I was introduced to expressionist painting and began to explore a world of artistic possibilities.”

Eemyun is now completing a postgraduate degree at the Royal Academy of Arts and is planning to stay in London after graduating because, she says, the chances of selling her work here are much higher than in many art centres.

Despite the gloomy economic predictions, London’s commercial art scene continues to thrive. London’s art market is worth £500 million, and just last year Goldsmith’s alumni Damien Hirst sold 200 pieces for a record £111 million in just two days. The city’s art dealers are continually searching for young talent, and many graduates at London’s art schools are signed up to a dealer within a year of graduation.

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Eemyun Kang

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Showcasing opportunities are also abundant. There are the famous galleries like the Royal Academy, which hosts the Summer Exhibition, and the National Portrait Gallery, home of the prestigious BP awards. And there are also around 150 smaller galleries spread across the city, many of which are concentrated in London’s East End.

For Eemyun the best thing about London’s art scene is that students form a close-knit community. “It is a very exciting scene,” she explains. “There are lots of opportunities to exhibit work and artists often get together to put on their own shows, sometimes even in their homes. There are always openings and private views to go to, and studio collectives to join.

It’s not formal at all, just very fluid and creative.”

Aside from the smaller showcasing spaces, there are also the huge fairs that take place each year, attracting the most important international galleries and buyers.

The London Art Fair has been running for twenty years and continues to draw lots of talent and interest, but it is the Frieze Art Fair that has gained popularity in recent years, attracting 450 galleries for its 150 places.

The hunger for art in London is phenomenal. Galleries are continually expanding to keep up with demand. When the Tate Modern opened in 2000 it expected two million people to walk through its doors each year. In fact their yearly attendance is five million, so they are currently working on a new building, opening in 2012.

Last summer saw the opening of the new Saatchi Gallery, and the cutting-edge Whitechapel Gallery in the East End has recently undergone a £13 million renovation that doubled its size.

London’s institutions couldn’t be better placed to take advantage of these resources. Chelsea College of Art and Design, whose alumni include six Turner Prize winners, is located opposite Tate Britain. Students there enjoy the privilege of curating and managing two of its public galleries.

The Courtauld Institute of Art, which has its own world-class gallery, is situated in Somerset House on the banks of the river Thames, just a short walk from the National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery and Tate Modern.

Ayla Lepine, a Canadian PhD student at Courtauld, feels she couldn’t be better placed. “This is literally the best school for me to study art history,” she explains. “The Institute is elite but not elitist, and has a strong student body who take care of each other. Also access to resources is extraordinary; it takes 20 minutes to get from my door to the best art galleries and museums in the world. What could be better?”