

New York's Newest Art Fair Feels Like a Place to Hang Out, Not Shop—and That's a Good Thing



BY ALEX GREENBERGER  May 1, 2024 1:59pm



Works by Lewis Miller, Skuja Braden, Talia Chetrit, and Tom Forkin at Esther.
PHOTO PIERRE LE HORS

New York is hardly in need of another art fair, but that's what we got this week in the form of Esther, which feels more like an ambitious group show than a selling event. That's something to be thankful for, since the art market in this city tends to be pretty risk-averse. And, despite the fact that Esther is designed to peddle art, this show has character, which is more than you can say for all the other interchangeable fairs that pass through the Big Apple annually.

For starters, there's Esther's bizarre location: the Estonian House, a volunteer-operated space devoted to Estonian culture that's located in Kips Bay. There are no cultural destinations around it, unless you count an AMC multiplex several blocks away.

Then there's the fair's ethos, which, for an event of its kind, is unusually not money-oriented. Esther was founded by Margot Samel and Olga Temnikova, who operate galleries in New York and Tallinn, respectively, and they've thought of it more as a means of collaboration than a place for dealers to sell their wares. Compared to Frieze, where booths typically cost tens of thousands of dollars, exhibitors at Esther must pay a flat rate of \$1,500 to take part. (Admission to Esther is free; a full-price ticket to Frieze can cost as much as \$206, depending on which day you visit.)

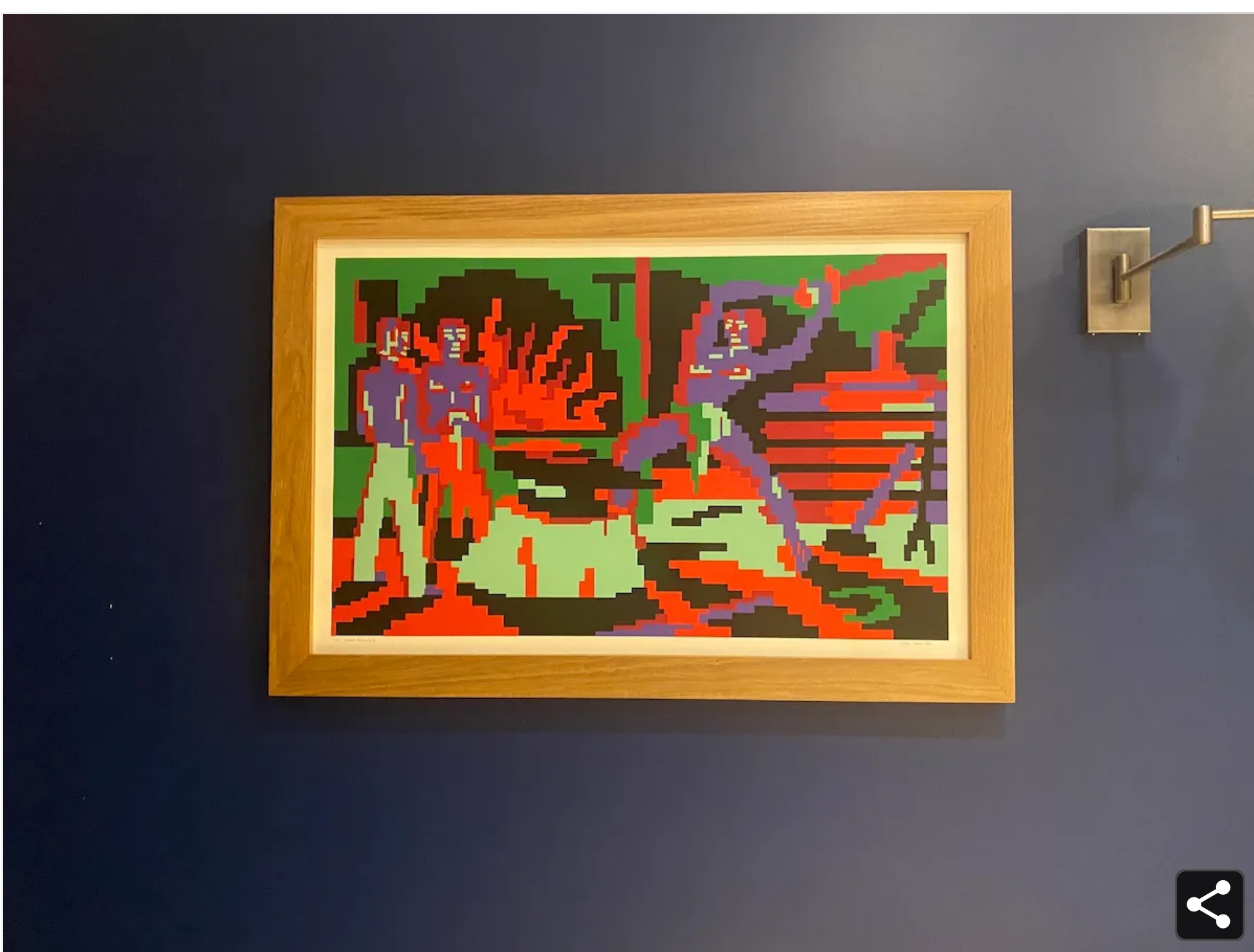
By Samel's own admission, Esther **may not have the most sustainable model**. Then again, this fair isn't only about conducting transactions—it's also about inspiring collectivity. As Samel **told ARTnews** last week, "What was important for us was creating an environment where galleries can take risks and think about it as a complementary platform versus a more competitive one that fairs tend to be."

Notably, there are no booths. The 25 galleries on hand have instead elected to intersperse their varied offerings, largely without any signage to delineate who's brought what to Esther. Perhaps for that reason, Esther feels more like a dealers' hangout than an art-market shark tank. Experiments in New York like Esther largely went extinct during the pandemic. It's a pleasure to have that spirit back.

How's the art itself? On the whole, it's good, not great. There's a lot of painting, and little of everything else, but at least the paintings at Esther largely aren't the figurative kind seen at the Friezes and Art Basels of the world. And many of the artists aren't stars, which means there's fresh talent to discover.

Below, a look at some of the best offerings at the first edition of Esther, which runs through May 4.

Jaanus Samma



Jaanus Samma, *Lepvalts's Kalevipoeg III*, 2023.

Photo : Photo Alex Greenberger/ARTnews

Temnikova's own gallery—Temnikova & Kasela, run with Indrek Kasela—has lined this fair with works by Jaanus Samma, whose woven works and prints often take up the notion of Estonianness itself. The silkscreen *Lepvalts's Kalevipoeg I* (2023) features a nearly nude, hunky man raising a sword above his head while two other shirtless guys look on. Its title is a reference to painter Rudolf Lepvalts's paintings about *Kalevipoeg*, a 19th-century epic poem commonly read as a call for Estonian independence, something the country did not declare until 1918. Samma, rather than simply reiterating Lepvalts's imagery, has pixelated it and paid more mind to the musculature of the poem's protagonist, giving special attention to his well-defined pecs. Samma's art has regularly circumscribed queerness within the history of Estonia, a country that was relatively open to gay people until it came under the control of the Soviet Union. Here, he suggests that texts core to the nation's collective consciousness may actually be laced with homoeroticism.