NEWS

Meet Esther, New York's Smart, Scrappy, and Small New Art Fair

During Frieze Week, 25 galleries will present work at the New York Estonian House.

Exterior of the Estonian House, which hosts the inaugural edition of Esther, a new art fair in New York. Courtesy of Estonian House.

by Andrew Russeth • February 29, 2024 • ⬆ Share This Article

It has been a wild few years in the art fair game, with power players like Frieze, Art Basel, and Art Assembly laying out large sums to acquire existing events. But all the while, scrappy dealers continue to hold their own, hosting pop-up booths and fan models, collaborating on projects like the Bowery Art Line or that Swiss city, Condo in London, and Tar Heel in Detroit.

Another entry in that DIY category will arrive in New York during Frieze Week, running May 1 through 4. It is called Esther, and it will gather 25 galleries—mostly young outfits plus a few veteranos—in the Estonian House, a building on East 20th Street, with art taking up residence in various rooms, hallways, and other spaces. Two Estonians are behind the project: Marjori Ainsaar, who ran a gallery under her name here in Manhattan's Tribeca neighborhood, and Olga Temnikova, of Tallinn's Temnikova & Kasela.

The two are interested in funeling this environment where galleries can take more risk," Ainsaar said in an interview. The participation fee for exhibitors is a mere $1,000. From the perspective of Temnikova, a Tier 1 art fair is not the place to take risks. "Collectors are very conservative, and they want to feel constantly, in the back of [their] minds, doing the right" of how many works need to be sold to break even. Expenses to participate in Esther are low, she said, and, in keeping with admission to the event will be free, but visitors will need to book a reservation.

The Estonian government is providing some funding, but Esther seems to be much more about supporting peers than turning a profit.

"Coming from Estonia, I usually don't have much opportunity to host other galleries," Temnikova said in a video call. "But this community is super important for me. So, to have some impact, and to do something special, it was kind of logical."

Planning began a year ago, and the two organizers' ambitions for Esther have grown. "At first I thought OK, it will be a pop-up of a few galleries," Temnikova said, but as the fest kept talking, plans became more and more ambitious.

The Estonian House—the headquarters for an expansive nonprofit that promotes the country's culture—is a four-story Beaux-Arts building that began life in the late 1890s as the Civic Club, which quickly shuttered. New York dealer Edna Lindner said she recalls the place being "very impressive," and the use of beautiful interior design as an alternative space to the standard fair designs." She will be showing new works on paper by artist Emma Kunhenen.

Interior of the New York Estonian House, the home of Esther. Courtesy of Estonian House.

Other dealers who have signed on include Dark (of Shanghai), Seventeen (London), Andrew Kreps Gallery (New York), and the Green Gallery (Milwaukee).

"Esther is a positive collaborative project, an invitation to a social and human-scale version of the art market," Green Gallery's Jason Fox Hendricks said in an email. "As a gallery between the Baltic States and the Great Lakes States, so the Green Gallery has an appreciation for the final venue's community and culture."

It sounds like Esther will be a nice place to hang out during the action packed fair week. "We will have events, like talks and performances, and we want people to come and stay," Ainsaar said. There will also be by-invitation dinners in the Estonian House's downstairs bar. The food? Estonian fare, naturally, like sausages and potato salad.

As for the name: The two dealers were discussing female names, and settled on Esther because its spelling connects with Estonia and "it's a very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very points, Estonia itself. There's no relation to dealers Esther Ann Venit or Esther Schipper, but it follows a semi-recent trend of art fairs named after people, like Frieze Masters, Frieze Los Angeles, and the Los Angeles nonprofit Zevin, not to mention the L.A. Art Fair.

Building a new event from scratch, you do it all yourself. "It's really hard to name an art fair," Ainsaar said.