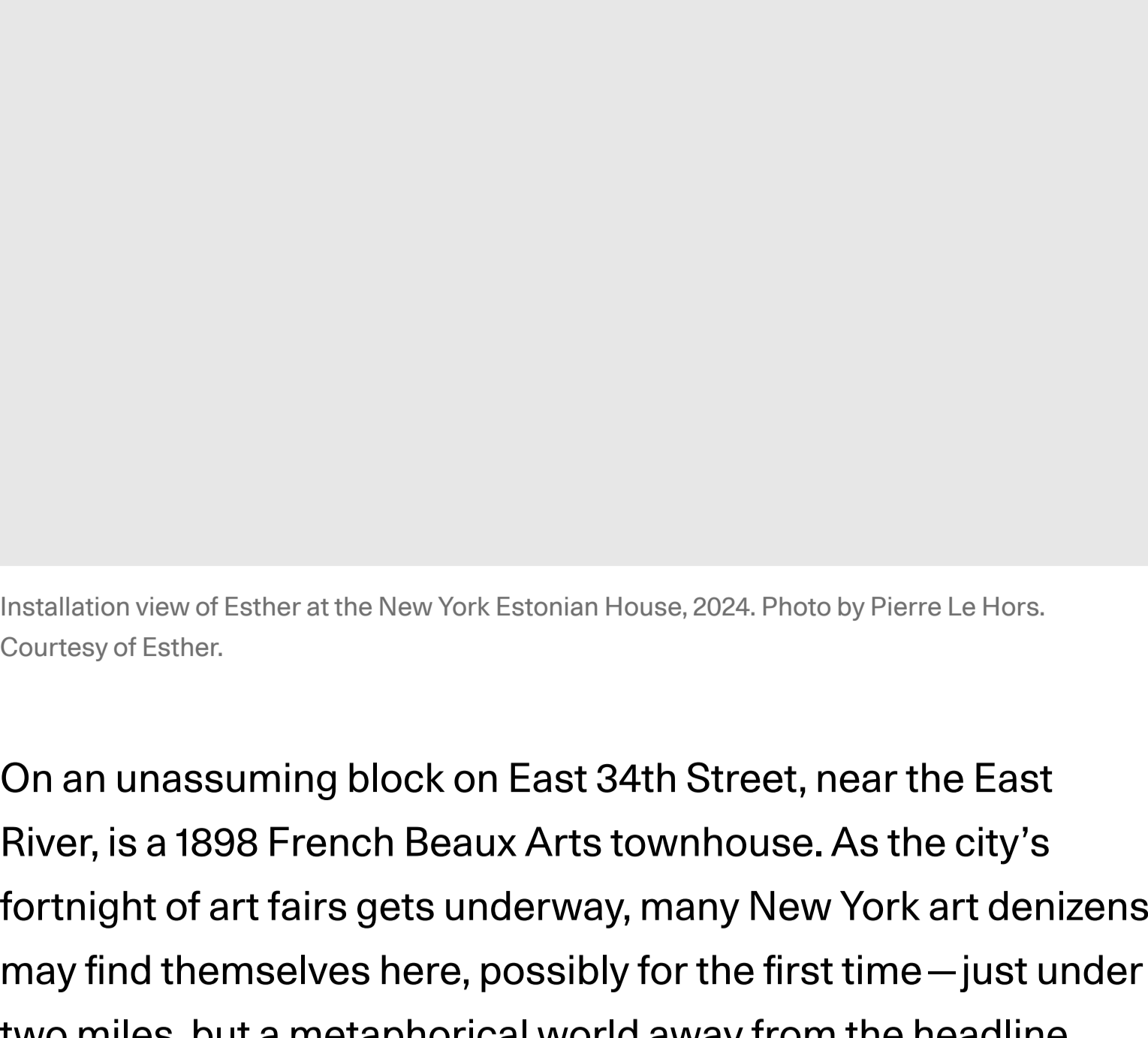


# Inside Esther, New York’s New Alternative Art Fair with a DIY Spirit

Olivia Horn

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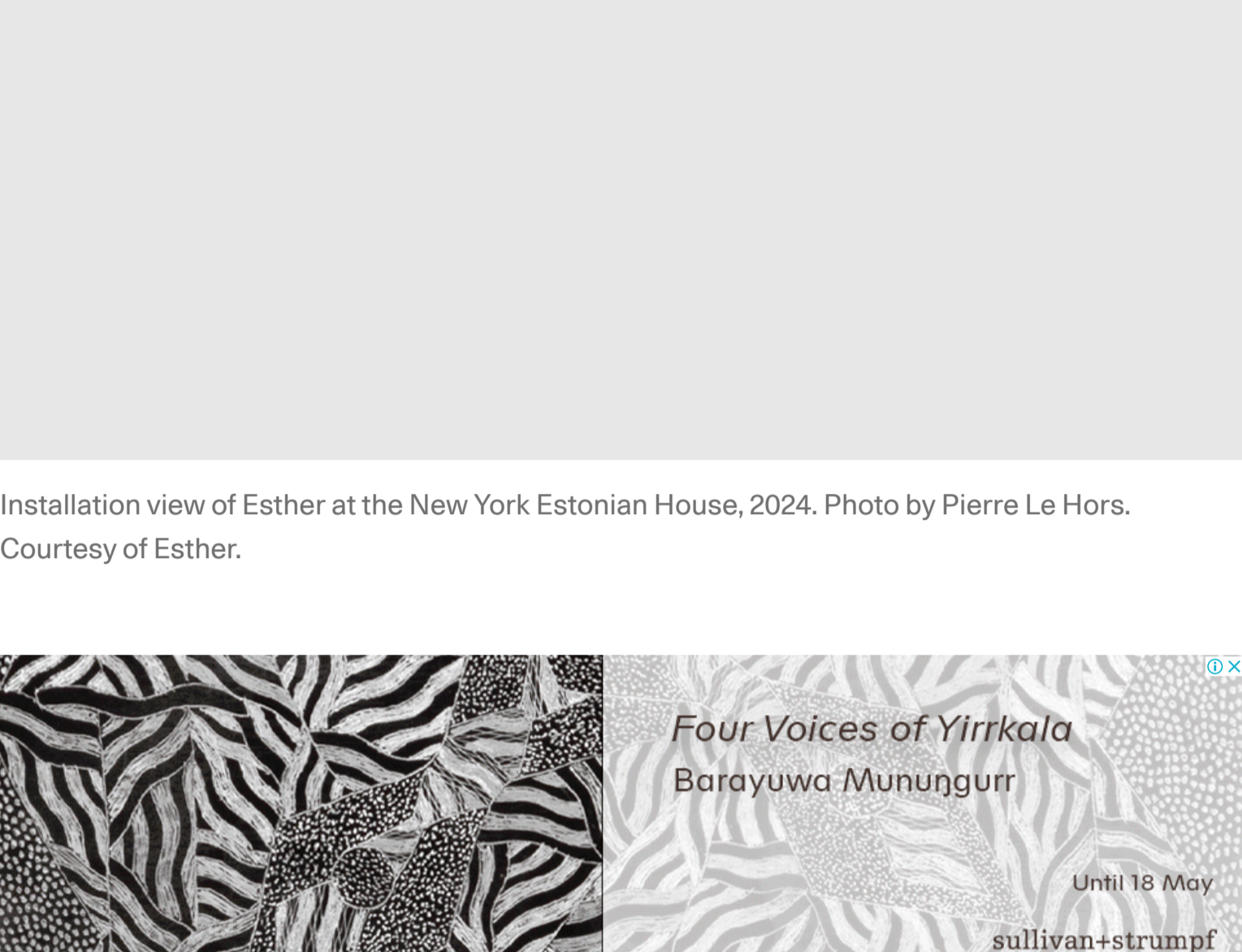


Installation view of Esther at the New York Estonian House, 2024. Photo by Pierre Le Hors. Courtesy of Esther.

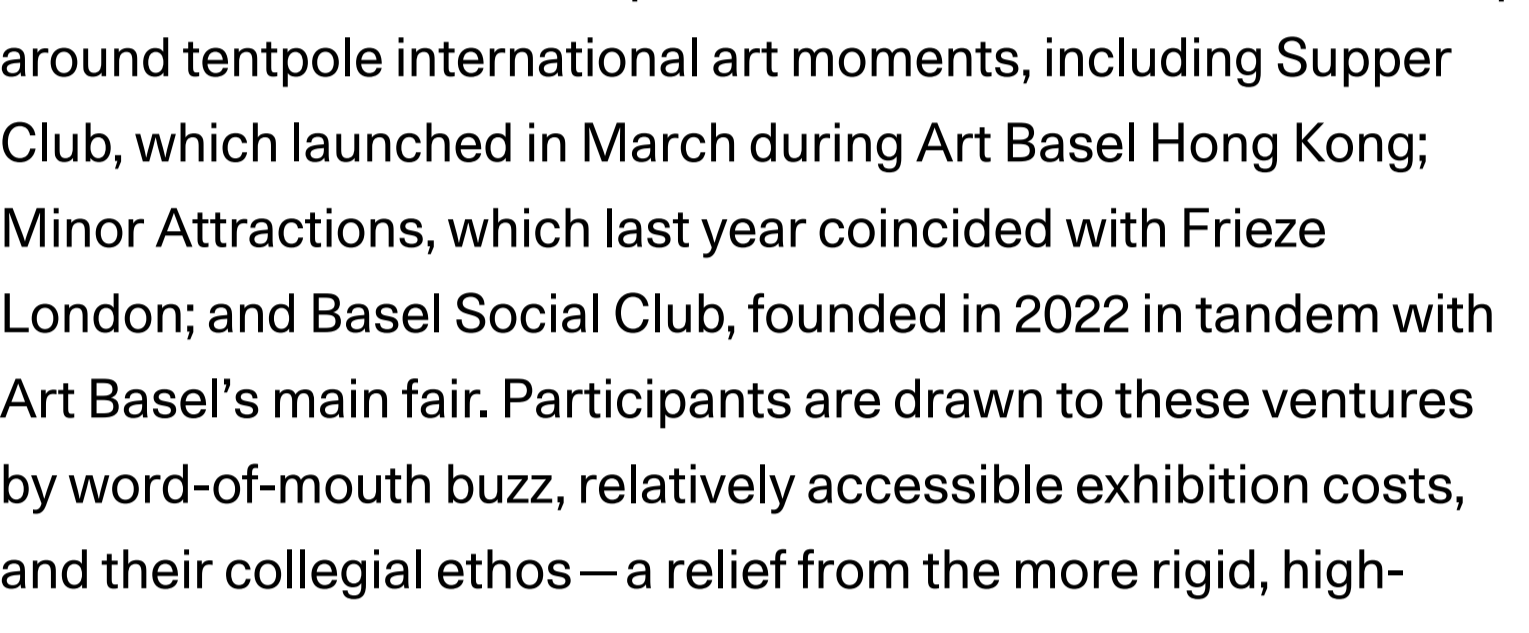
On an unassuming block on East 34th Street, near the East River, is a 1898 French Beaux Arts townhouse. As the city’s fortnight of art fairs gets underway, many New York art denizens may find themselves here, possibly for the first time—just under two miles, but a metaphorical world away from the headline appeal of Frieze New York at The Shed and its various satellites. Since 1946, the building has been the headquarters of the New York Estonian Educational Society; with its dark, wood-paneled walls, chandeliers, ample fireplaces, and narrow halls, it has none of the tidy, blank-slate segmentation found at big-name commercial art fairs.

Margot Samel, founder of her [eponymous New York gallery](#), and Olga Temnikova, of Estonian gallery Temnikova & Kasela, visited the space together last year on a reconnaissance mission. The two gallerists, who share Estonian heritage as well as an artist ([Kris Lemsalu](#)) in their respective programs, had just exhibited in a joint booth at Independent. Temnikova, a veteran of mainstream New York fairs, was versed in the logistical and financial challenges that they posed to international galleries like hers, and wanted to try something different. She thought maybe a pop-up of five galleries; Samel suggested 25.

Ultimately, their brainchild became Esther, a new alternative art fair whose inaugural edition—featuring 26 galleries from four continents, with strong representation from Eastern and Northern Europe—runs through May 4th.



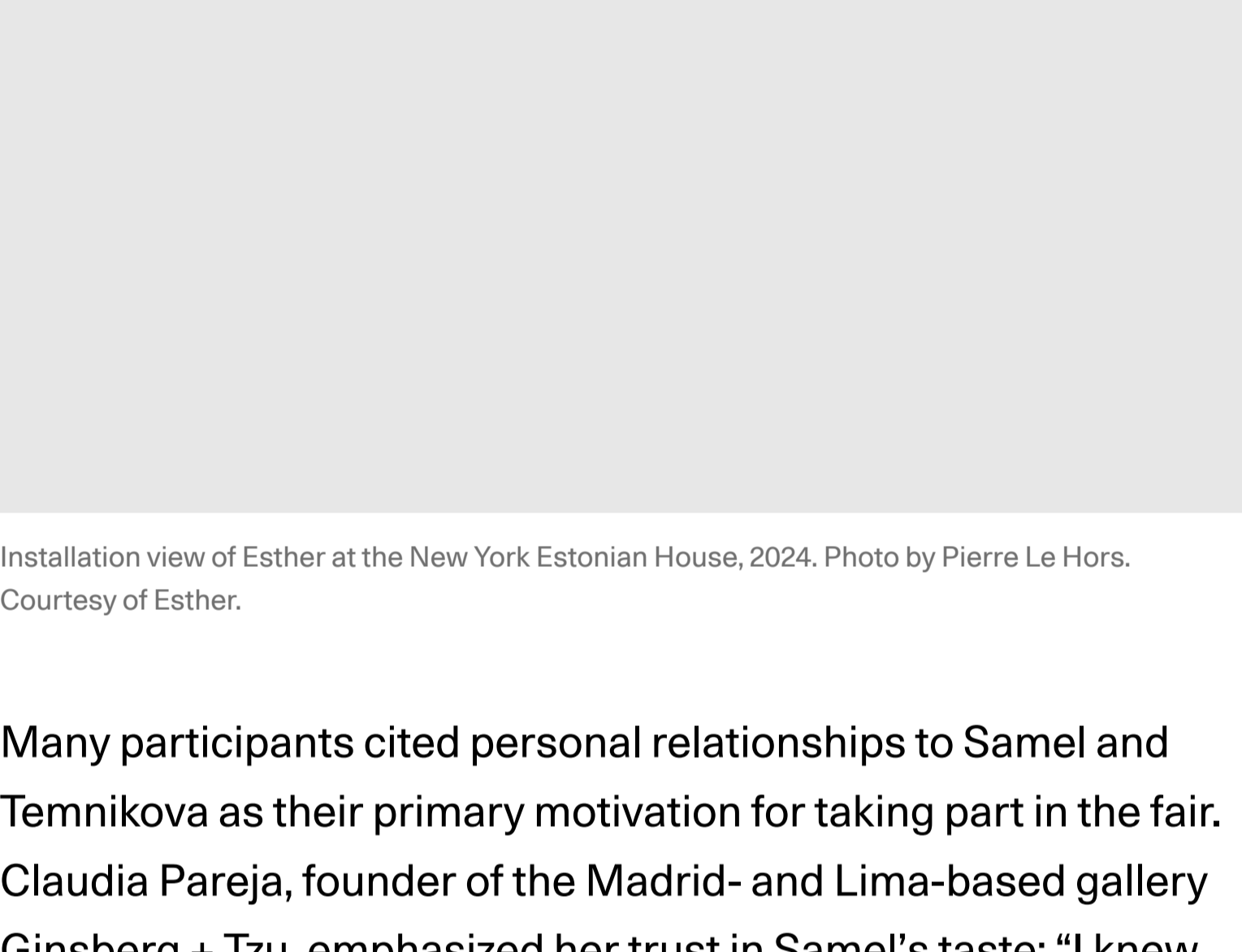
Installation view of Esther at the New York Estonian House, 2024. Photo by Pierre Le Hors. Courtesy of Esther.



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Esther is the latest in a [crop of alternative fairs](#) that have shot up around tentpole international art moments, including Supper Club, which launched in March during Art Basel Hong Kong; Minor Attractions, which last year coincided with Frieze London; and Basel Social Club, founded in 2022 in tandem with Art Basel’s main fair. Participants are drawn to these ventures by word-of-mouth buzz, relatively accessible exhibition costs, and their collegial ethos—a relief from the more rigid, high-pressure environments often found at traditional fairs.

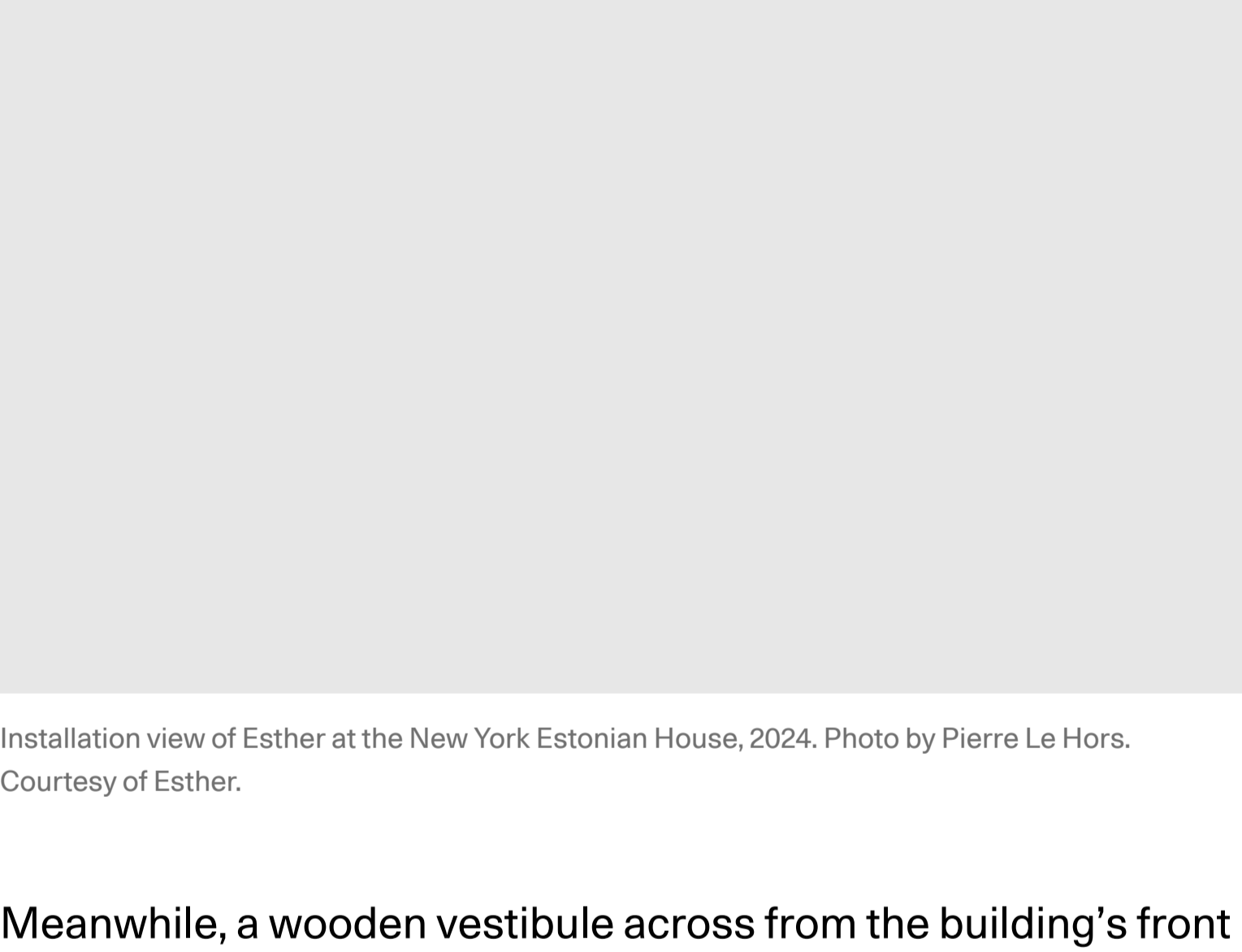
That sense of camaraderie was on view from the moment Esther opened its doors on Tuesday. As Samel and Temnikova greeted early comers to the press preview, one of the participating gallerists arrived lugging cases of bottled water, and asked the organizers where to deliver his haul. For Samel, the incident was illustrative: “This is, on all levels, such a collaborative fair. Exhibitors keep reaching out to us asking what they can do to help, because we pulled it together on a shoestring budget, with this very DIY spirit,” she told Artsy.



Installation view of Esther at the New York Estonian House, 2024. Photo by Pierre Le Hors. Courtesy of Esther.

Many participants cited personal relationships to Samel and Temnikova as their primary motivation for taking part in the fair. Claudia Pareja, founder of the Madrid- and Lima-based gallery [Ginsberg.t.tzu](#), emphasized her trust in Samel’s taste: “I knew that her eye would guarantee a good environment and an amazing level” of work, she said. Pareja’s gallery is showing the Ecuadorian artist [Xavier Coronel](#), whose works on canvas are awash in pastel colors and pop culture references, as well as [Cristina Flores Pescorán](#), who weaves raffia fibers, using pre-Columbian techniques, into delicate forms that evoke cellular biology or peeling skin. With Coronel’s work, the gallery was met with the challenges of exhibiting in a non-traditional venue: One of the paintings could not fit through the door to be installed, Pareja said.

But the idiosyncrasies of the Estonian House also yield moments of delight. In the pool room, kaufmann repetto, which has locations in Milan and New York, is showing stylized ceramics by artist duo [Skuja Braden](#). The vessels’ brash, cartoonish iconography, which draws on American pinups and Japanese erotica, is complemented by their cheeky presentation atop a pool table—as if the women depicted are daring you to bounce them around like billiard balls. Upstairs, Shanghai gallery BANK brought a video work from [Oliver Herring](#)’s “Areas for Action” series, which documents experimental, collaborative actions by volunteer performers, such as splashing one another with paint and glitter. The screen is situated atop a grand piano, whose reflective surface amplifies the sensory impact of the moving image.



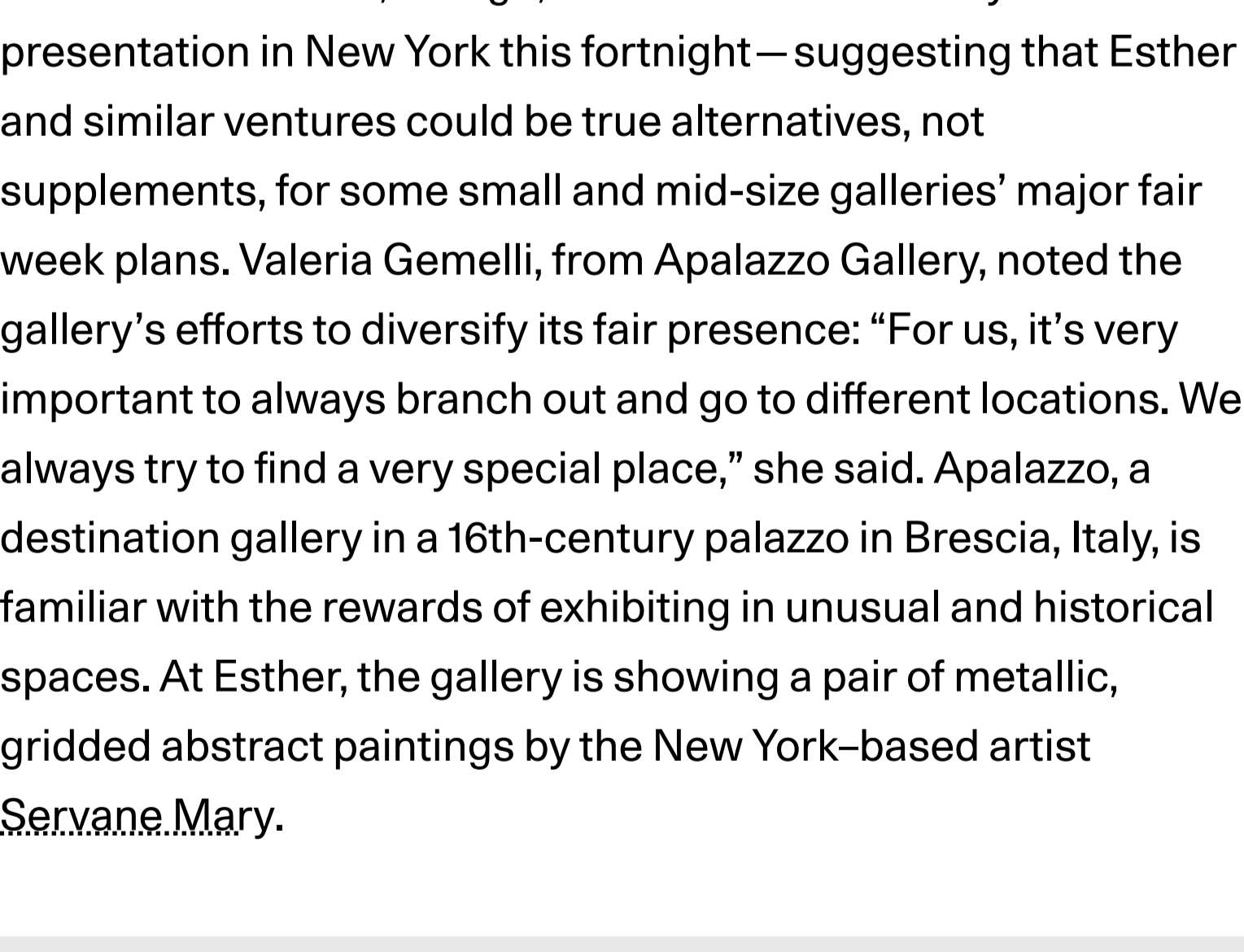
Installation view of Esther at the New York Estonian House, 2024. Photo by Pierre Le Hors. Courtesy of Esther.

Meanwhile, a wooden vestibule across from the building’s front door offers a serendipitous frame for a sculpture by [Jesse Wine](#),

among the more established artists to appear at Esther.

Presented by Glasgow-based gallery The Modern Institute, *O Do Rot Coat Roast Aortic Actions Tornadoes Consortia Rodin’s Coat* (2024) references [Auguste Rodin](#)’s *Monument to Balzac* (1898), echoing the latter’s fluid, robed figure but removing its head—gesturing to the artist’s recent loss of his father. The gallery is also participating in Frieze, and an associate noted the stark contrast between that fair’s sales-driven climate and Esther’s more relaxed atmosphere.

For most exhibitors, though, Esther will be their only fair presentation in New York this fortnight—suggesting that Esther and similar ventures could be true alternatives, not supplements, for some small and mid-size galleries’ major fair week plans. Valeria Gemelli, from Apalazzo Gallery, noted the gallery’s efforts to diversify its fair presence: “For us, it’s very important to always branch out and go to different locations. We always try to find a very special place,” she said. Apalazzo, a destination gallery in a 16th-century palazzo in Brescia, Italy, is familiar with the rewards of exhibiting in unusual and historical spaces. At Esther, the gallery is showing a pair of metallic, gridded abstract paintings by the New York-based artist [Servane Mary](#).



Bertha Leonard, *Innocence*, 1983. Courtesy of the artist and Margot Samel.

The venue’s compact quarters make for pared-back presentations across the board. Near Apalazzo, London-based gallery [Gathering](#) is also showing just two works, both from [Taj Shani](#)’s recently concluded exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, Ohio—the first solo show in the U.S. for the Turner Prize-winning British artist, whose multidisciplinary practice foregrounds femininity, mythology, and the politics of resistance. Gathering’s founder, Alex Flick, expressed a desire to have more work on view, but was enthused about the experience nonetheless. “It’s really important for galleries our size to stick to collaborating, because the art market is fluctuating, and there’s so many big galleries that take up a lot of space,” he said. “We need our friends.”

The friends at the heart of Esther, Samel and Temnikova, have ambitions for their fair to grow increasingly experimental in future editions. “I hope for next year we’re going to do it really site-specific,” Temnikova said, noting that many exhibitors’ unfamiliarity with the venue this year limited how responsive they could be to the space. Samel herself is modeling the sort of chances she wants participants to be able to take at Esther, bringing two oil paintings by Bertha Leonard—a 96-year-old artist whose work she discovered mere weeks ago, and whose practice she is in the early stages of researching. The works, a pair of fanciful, ornately patterned interior scenes from the 1980s, are among the fair’s standouts—a risk well worth taking.



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