

Mauea Egan, 'Welcome to Brussels: Europe's unexpected art-world hotspot', Travel+Leisure, December 2015

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Welcome to Brussels: Europe's Unexpected Art-World Hotspot

Brussels may be less glamorous than Paris and more buttoned-up than Berlin—but that's exactly why the Belgian capital has emerged as an implausible artistic hub.

by Maura Egan December 14, 2015



My friend and I refer to Brussels as the B side of the record,” says Megan Marrin, an American artist who recently returned to New York City after a yearlong residency at Wiels, Brussels’s most important contemporary art center, which is housed in a former brewery in a gritty expanse south of the city. “It’s not the catchy, pop-friendly A side that everyone falls for, but after listening to it a few times, you end up liking it even more.”

Brussels has always suffered from an underdog reputation—it’s a place with a perennial identity crisis. Though mainly a French-speaking city, it’s in the middle of a Dutch-speaking (Flemish) region. To add to the confusion, Brussels is the de facto capital of the European Union as well as the headquarters for NATO, so almost two-thirds of the city’s population is made up of foreigners, many of them transient. Most of the expats I encountered were quick to joke that the best thing about living in Brussels is that it’s only a Eurostar trip away from more-freewheeling places like Paris and London. “It’s the perfect place for a pied-à-terre,” one Norwegian creative director told me.

“I lived in Milwaukee for ten years so I am used to this sort of strange, smaller-city vibe,” said the painter Tyson Reeder, who, after doing a solo show at the Office Baroque gallery last spring, continued to live in the city for a few months during a sabbatical from his teaching job at the Art Institute of Chicago. “It’s sort of like: ‘Where am I?’ ”

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Recently, despite (or perhaps because of) the city's no there-there atmosphere, an enthusiastic circle of creative pioneers—namely, artists, gallerists, and curators—from cities like Paris, Antwerp, and New York have quietly claimed Brussels as their own. “It’s a very international city,” Zoë Gray, a British-born curator at Wiels, told me. She is very optimistic about what it’s becoming or could become. “It has all the cultural possibilities—there’s a real appreciation here of the arts like opera, dance, theater, and film, just on a smaller scale.” She walked me through “Un-Scene III,” a summer group show of 13 emerging international artists, of which all but one are based in Brussels. There are the David Hockney-meets-Jan van Eyck paintings of artist Leen Voet, who depicts the modern interiors of the country’s postwar churches as a way of documenting a time when the church had lost its power and was trying to attract congregants again. There’s German-born photographer Stephanie Kiwitt’s “Choco Choco” series, which consists of huge, glossy images of factory workers making fine chocolate—a commentary on labor versus luxury. “Although, we wanted to avoid a show about just chocolate and churches,” Gray pointed out. “That would be too Belgium.” Indeed, there is nothing provincial about Wiels. I saw a group of international artists working in studios as part of the center’s residency program; many of them will remain in the city afterward. That day, a handful of them ate lunch in the former brewery’s canteen, which still features the brewery’s enormous copper vats. Others milled about in the bookshop, which is filled with art zines and stacks of critical-theory books. “It doesn’t feel stale,” Gray said. “There’s a freshness here.”



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Belgium has one of the highest numbers of art collectors per capita in the world, and though they are less flashy than other art-world players, they are intelligent and very considered in their aesthetic pursuits. While cheap real estate and a central location may have lured the artists here, it’s the local collector base that is fueling the scene. “We picked this spot because we wanted to be near high-fashion stores selling Anne Demeulemeester and Maison Margiela. That’s our audience,” said Office Baroque director Louis-Philippe Van Eeckhoutte, explaining why the gallery moved from Antwerp to Brussels’s trendy Dansaert section in 2013. Like those directional fashion designers, the artists at Office Baroque trade in high concept. The day I visited their first gallery, housed in a 1909, Art Nouveau cast-iron building by Bruxellois architect Paul Hamesse (their second gallery is on Rue Ravenstein), a group show entitled “Rio” (named after the iconic cover for Duran Duran’s 1982 album) was on view. It celebrated the pop aesthetic of the 1980s—Peter Halley’s graphic paintings, the bright, colorful works of former Memphis Group ceramist Peter Shire. There were also pieces by the newer generation of artists whose work harks back to this era, like Michael Rey, who creates retro-futuristic Plasticine objects, and Marc Hundley, who silkscreens lyrics from 1980s music onto large posters. “The collectors here are really sophisticated. Antwerp may be the center of fashion, but the collectors are making Brussels the place for contemporary art,” Van Eeckhoutte told me.

The gallerist Catherine Bastide explained that collectors here have a very good eye. “They go deep and really educate themselves about the work. They’re not in it for the names.” A Frenchwoman who worked in galleries in New York and Los Angeles before coming to Belgium, Bastide was the motivating force behind the recently established 67 Rue de la Régence art hub, a former law-publishing office building next to the imposing Palais de Justice. It now houses six galleries, including Bastide’s namesake space on the top floor and, just below her, Galerie Micheline Szwjacer, a blue-chip establishment and recent transplant from Antwerp.

Across the courtyard is Mon Chéri, a joint venture of two rising Parisian galleries, Galerie Valentin and Galerie Jeanroch Dard. The installation I saw was titled Jailbait (For Us by Us), which was a reference to the 1990s hip-hop clothing label FUBU and featured

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Uniqlo clothes that were strewn from a ceiling fan, Chinese characters affixed to windows, and a fountain on four table legs with a toy dog's head sticking out one side. It was slightly messy and intellectual and had something to do with the global capital police state we live in. It was also refreshingly energetic, and the pretty girl behind the front desk told me that the artist would be coming back soon if I wanted to discuss the work with him. But by then, I had moved on.

"Brussels is a serious city, but we are not so fancy," said Sébastien Janssen, whose gallery, Sorry We're Closed, is just beneath Mon Chéri and shows an eclectic roster of international talent, including Joshua Abelow, an emerging Brooklyn-based poet and painter, and the Los Angeles ceramist Brian Rochefort, whose work regularly sells out in both Brussels and New York. "The people here are very open and eccentric," Janssen said. Perhaps this is the reason the Independent, the New York art fair that injected some much-needed buzz around the fusty Armory Show, has set up shop in this gallery complex. The Independent's organizers are using the space for exhibitions and as head-quarters in their preparations to launch their first fair in the city's Vanderborcht building this spring.

"You don't feel a big difference between the major galleries and the alternative scene here," the French artist Nicolas Bourthoumieux, who recently showed at Galerie Catherine Bastide, explained. "Many of the artist-run spaces and nonprofit galleries are as good as their big brothers. People attend both with the same enthusiasm." There's an eager audience for every stratum of creativity in the city—whether it's a museum-caliber Anish Kapoor show at Gladstone Gallery (the New York gallery opened an outpost here in 2008) or Reeder's pop-up art comedy club, Club Nutz, which was held at the Brussels Art Institute. This Bauhaus-like operation, which offers art, film, architecture, and music workshops south of the city, was founded by the Belgian artist Jan de Cock. "I couldn't believe how many locals showed up on stage to tell jokes," Reeder recalled.

This excitement may be due to the fact that there has been no nexus for contemporary art since the city's main modern art museum closed in 2011. In fact, a few years ago, when Herman Daled, an esteemed local collector, decided to deacquisition his impressive collection of 1960s and 70s conceptual art, he chose the Museum of Modern Art in New York as the recipient. "We didn't have an institution here capable of the conservation and archiving required for a collection of that scale," Bastide lamented. The museums that do exist here have a sleepy, staid feel, showcasing the usual greatest hits like Dutch still lifes, Bruegel pastoral landscapes, and kitschy Magrittes. Some blame the city's bureaucracy for being inattentive to the need for a proper contemporary art institution. Lately, there has been talk about a new museum, but the governing parties can't seem to agree on a singular vision for it.

However, what some residents see as pesky red tape, others see as an opportunity to keep things interesting. "The backwardness of the place allows for a creative freedom," said Bourthoumieux, who moved here in 2009, just before the country went through almost two years with no elected government. "It's the capital of Europe and yet there was no government here. I love the contradiction you find here in everyday life!" The international population means, too, that there isn't one dominant culture—a boon for independent creators, according to Gray. "I love the lack of an organizing principle," she said. "I think it keeps it fresh and porous. Anything goes here."

Brussels does feel like a city made up of disparate micro-scenes, and because it's on such a compact scale, you can move easily through them. There are the wealthy French expats (many fled here to escape their country's punishing tax laws) hanging out in the smart cafés of the leafy Place Brugmann. There's the Zita hotel, which opened in the fall of 2014. Claire de Traux, who worked at Pierre Bergé's auction house, renovated the stylish old brick building with her business partner, Karim Bassil, an entrepreneur from Lebanon. They've filled the space with flea-market finds (attention Midcentury-design fans: Brussels may be the best European city that hasn't been completely picked over by vintage vultures) and art from local artists.

Consider, too, New Zealand-born artist Marnie Slater. Her oil-on-canvas triptych, which was part of the "Un-Scene III" show, illustrates one of the weekly French classes she took when she first arrived in the city. Simple nouns (tummy, tushy, thumb) are scrawled on a chalkboard, and a student's elbow appears on the left panel. Slater told me she was relieved that she has found a place to make art. "There was a point where I became quite exhausted with the expectation that you had to constantly be on the lookout for the ideal city at the perfect moment—that you could somehow be too late for Berlin, too early for Vilnius."

Indeed, it might just be Brussels's moment.