

BRAFA ART FAIR

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BRAFA 2022: seduce and reassure

Interview with Harold t’Kint de Roodenbeke, Chairman of BRAFA

In 2020, BRAFA was the last major international fair to be held before the outbreak of the pandemic. In 2021, faced with the impossibility of organising a ‘classic’ edition, it showed creativity by initiating a decentralised formula in the galleries, in compliance with the various limitations effective in its exhibitors’ countries of origin. This 2022 edition therefore marks its grand return to the face-to-face version of the fair. With a leitmotiv: seduce and reassure.



Harold t’Kint de Roodenbeke, Chairman of BRAFA
Picture BRAFA / Fabrice Debatty

Harold t’Kint de Roodenbeke, first of all, let’s take a look back: how did Brafa respond to the pandemic? How did it adapt?

Like everyone else, we were surprised by the speed and strength of the crisis. Fortunately, all the members of the Board of Directors are themselves dealers, which meant that we could understand our colleagues’ predicament: the cessation of activities, the loss of income, the loss of contacts, the difficulty in renewing one’s stock. In autumn 2020, at the Extraordinary General Meeting, we decided to postpone the 2021 edition of the fair, for obvious reasons. Nevertheless, we felt the need to be able to use the name and dates of BRAFA in a

positive way. This is how the 'BRAFA in the Galleries' concept and initiative was born, which, as its name suggests, took place in our participants' galleries, wherever possible. The classic BRAFA was therefore decentralised into more than a hundred 'mini-BRAFAs,' distributed throughout 37 cities around the world, all promoted by our website and active communication. The main aim of this initiative was to support our exhibitors, and they welcomed it unanimously, as did the press, and the visitors who came: according to many, it felt like a real breath of fresh air. The formula was then taken up by other fairs, but we are very proud to have been the instigators!

Like all mainstream events, art fairs have been very affected - some commentators have even foretold their demise... Do you think that art fairs still have a bright future?

Of course! In fact, this period has especially consolidated our feeling that no alternative can replace a face-to-face event. We have seen a proliferation of 'online' and other 'viewing rooms,' but collectors quickly grew tired of them. These are formats that I think are limited to very specific fields, or to short periods, or that may be suitable as a complementary platform. But art has to be lived, experienced: the emotion procured by physical contact with a work of art is irreplaceable. The success of the fairs organised this fall proves that they remain essential for galleries and collectors. They are the most unique platforms for exchanges on the market.

Some galleries have stated in the press that they wanted to reassess their participation in fairs and salons. Has this position resulted in participants pulling out of BRAFA?

No, not at all. These statements were made by galleries who exhibit at ten or twelve events a year around the world. But their profile does not correspond to that of our exhibitors, who registered very early, as soon as the participation files were received. One of BRAFA's strengths is the loyalty of its exhibitors, with a stable first participation rate of around 10-15% for each edition. This means that the participating galleries work well at BRAFA and have found their audience there. And this audience is also satisfied: visitors appreciate the fair, they come back every year, and they travel mainly from neighbouring, European countries, so we do not depend on the fluctuations of intercontinental visitors.

This year, 134 galleries are taking part in BRAFA, including approximately 20 for the first time. Can you identify any trends over the last few editions?

First of all, half of the new galleries had already joined us for the 'BRAFA in the Galleries' edition, but like the other newcomers, they will discover the traditional BRAFA in situ for the first time. It is difficult to identify trends, but it is clear that the profile of the galleries at BRAFA reflects the overall evolution of the market. In recent years, modern classics and contemporary art have flourished, but they have been maintained at their current levels, despite a strong demand for active representation in these fields. We also want to maintain a strong presence of antique art dealers. In the recent past, BRAFA has been a pioneer amongst classical art fairs, welcoming creations by comic book authors or dinosaur skeletons and other cinema costumes (pieces that redefine the 'cabinet of curiosities' in the twenty-first century). For this edition, the fair will further expand its palette by presenting painters from Northern Europe, Himalayan art, and Islamic art, for the first time. The most important thing, in my opinion, is that each

gallery, whether a long-term participant or a newcomer, brings its personality, its universe, and contributes to the enrichment of BRAFA as a whole.

How would you preface this 2022 edition?

With lots of enthusiasm and energy! We feel a great impatience amongst all our participants, and also amongst the many visitors eager to get back to their favourite event. Above all, we would like to propose a full and complete BRAFA, as we know it and appreciate it. With great dealers, with very high-quality works of art, with great diversity, and also with a special, unique atmosphere, imprinted with true conviviality. Of course, we will be maintaining all of our complementary programmes (VIP, BRAFA Art Talks, BRAFA Art Tours) but in a more exclusive format, which is better-adapted to the situation. Special attention will of course be given to welcoming all our visitors. In this regard, we are keeping a close watch on the situation, and we will strictly respect the arrangements in place. We are aware that this will be a rather special edition. The message we want to deliver is twofold: seduce and reassure.

Arne Quinze will be your first Belgian Guest of Honour?

Indeed, and this is also part of our desire to reinvent ourselves and go back to our roots. But more than his nationality, it is above all Arne Quinze's art that is eloquent. His entire oeuvre is inspired by the beauties of nature, and flowers in particular, which he spends hours cultivating and studying in the wild garden that he has cleverly arranged around his house. By means of his numerous projects and installations in cities as varied as Paris, Shanghai, Beirut, Washington DC, Mumbai, São Paulo or just recently Dubai, he tries to reintroduce nature to urban spaces where it is completely absent. He prompts us to question our environment, our place in it, to marvel at the beauties of nature, in a way, to reconnect with our roots. He will be present at BRAFA with paintings, drawings, sculptures, and sound and video installations, without forgetting the design of this edition's carpet. His expressive and colourful creations will undoubtedly instil a joyful and positive atmosphere at BRAFA, which will be particularly suitable for this comeback edition.

The BRAFA Board of Directors was recently re-elected in its entirety with you as Chairman. What will be the main objectives of your new three-year mandate?

We have seen how quickly the world can change. BRAFA will have to retain its capacity to adapt, to cope with the unexpected, it will have to continue to transform, to seek new ways of adapting to the evolution of the world and the art market. It will also have to preserve the remarkable balance that it has cultivated over the years, and which is its signature today. In a word, we wish it mobility and inventiveness, a skilful mixture of realism and intuition, to always look forward whilst drawing its strength from the richness of its past. I believe that BRAFA has wonderful assets: a central geographical position with great access facilities from the main European capitals, surrounded by financially and culturally dynamic regions, with a huge number of collectors, and a loyal and knowledgeable audience. And finally, it must be able to stay close to galleries and dealers, to listen to the market and its trends, to integrate some of them without succumbing to fads... It's a big challenge, but it is exciting!

Interview by Bruno Néllis

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