Big sales at blue-chip galleries for heavyweight artists affirmed the current taste for established names at 38th edition of Art Basel, writes Rebecca Proctor.

n Gianelli伦佐's gargantuan Unlimited section at this year's Art Basel, the late Los Angeles artist Chris Burden's Ode to Santa Dalmata (2013) circles around in the cavernous exhibition hall for 15 minutes at a time so that it doesn't overwhelm. The artwork, which took Burden a decade to produce, was inspired by the handsomely known Brazilian aviation pioneer Alberto Santos Dumont. In 1901, his pioneering aship flew around the Eiffel Tower. Crowds gathered round the artist's engineering feat like children at a parade, eager to get a glimpse of the artist's rarely-before-seen magnificent flying machine. The performance sculpture pays tribute to the ideals of optimism, persistence of experimentation, innovation, and failure—character traits needed during times such as ours.

While past years witnessed collectors rush to pick up emerging contemporary artists, this year saw the yearly pilgrimage rush to the fair's Tuesday high-energy VIP opening to the 295 galleries to buy the trusted greats of Modern art, reaffirming the current trend for the big names and otherwise safe bets—signs of the uncertainty of the present economy. Among the early sales were Pablo Picasso's Homme Assis (1909), priced at $11m, and Wassily Kandinsky's 1924 Berge (Continent) for $3.5m at New York's Helly Nahmad gallery. Montreal's Landau Fine Art, known for its abundance of Modern masters, sold Picasso's Homme à la pipe (1909) and René Magritte's Le demi-sommeil (1960), for $20.5m each. Works by Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose Untitled (1982) sold for a record $99m ($11.5m with fees) at Sotheby's in May, were found in abundance on the ground floor.

More adventurous, cutting-edge work could be found on the first floor of the fair, generally the area for younger artists with smaller prices. "There's been a real rejuvenation of the secondary market galleries," says Marc Spiegler, Art Basel Global Director. "One of the things that's always interesting are the new galleries coming into the fair. Traditionally, more galleries have tended to come in uptairs, but we have also focused on bringing in young, dynamic, secondary market galleries downstairs. This rejuvenation is necessary for Spiegler because younger galleries are working hard to get "great material in order to develop great collectors."

For example, New York-based gallery Luhring Augustine, which previously made appearances in two Art Basel Feature sections, graduated this year to the gallery sector, showcasing highlights from Post-War Italian art, including Lucio Fontana, Alberto Burri, Pino Di Costanzo, and Domenico Gnoli, among others. Making a statement to mark its arrival is Italian Tornabeone gallery, which pulled together four of Lucio Fontana's rare, late La Fine di Dio (The End of God) (1963-64) works. Regular participants Johannesberg and Cape Town-based gallery Goodman sold several editions of Candido Portinari's 1977 video Double ($100,000 each)—a work that references the artist's showing at South Africa's pavilion in the Venice Biennale this year. Dealers such as Emmanuel Perrotin, known for more cutting-edge contemporary art, joined forces with Soweto Lee on a three-tier booth dedicated to the 1950s where they sold several works by Hans Hartung for around £70,000 and €300,000.

Among galleries from Dubai was Green Art Gallery who exhibited in the Statements section with a solo booth of works by Pakistan-born US-based artist Syed Shah. "We had a great response to the works, both commercially and institutionally, and we were able to the work in great collections," said the gallery's Yasmin Arami. "The "Pentagon is going to include Shah's work in a group show in October." Five years ago
Green Art Gallery participated in the Statements section with a booth dedicated to the work of Shahid Habib Allah. Dubai and New York-based Noha Foda described the artist’s solo show, which was the first to be held by the gallery, and featured works by the artist. 

Green Art Gallery also showcased the work of other artists, including a joint exhibition with the Palestinian artist Bushra Mansour. The exhibition featured works by Mansour and other artists from the Palestinian territories. 

The gallery also featured a series of performances and installations, including a live performance by the Palestinian artist Bushra Mansour. The performance was part of the exhibition and featured a live performance by the artist. 

Art Basel is one of the largest art fairs in the world and attracts thousands of visitors from around the world. The fair is known for its high-end contemporary art and attracts buyers and collectors from all over the world. 

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"There’s been a real rejuvenation of the art market galleries," says Marc Spiegler, Global Director. "One of the things that’s most interesting is the new galleries that are coming on the scene. Traditionally, more galleries would come into the market, but we have seen a trend towards bringing in young, dynamic art galleries into the mix. This is particularly true in the Statements section, where we are seeing a lot of new galleries participating."

Spiegler points to the work of New York-based artist Bushra Mansour, who was featured in the Statements section. Mansour’s work, which focuses on issues of identity and displacement, was well-received by visitors to the fair. 

"It’s amazing to see how much the art market has changed over the past decade," says Spiegler. "Art Basel is now more than just a place to buy art, it’s a platform for cultural exchange and dialogue. We’re seeing more and more galleries participating and it’s exciting to see the growth of the art market here." 

"We have always been concerned with the promotion of contemporary art," says Spiegler. "One of the things that makes Art Basel special is the opportunity it provides for emerging artists to be seen by a wider audience. We are committed to supporting the growth and development of the art market and we are excited to see what the future holds."