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The market for photography is on a roll

The launch of Photofairs New York during Armory Week reflects a resurgent market for photographs and related media



AI is used in Sarp Kerem Yavuz's *Polaroids from the Ottoman Empire* (2023) series
Courtesy of the artist and Von Lintel Gallery

The Armory Show has long had its share of photo-centric presentations, but this year it will be sharing the Javits Center with a new fair showcasing photography and related media: [Photofairs New York](#), which will launch with 56 exhibitors. While the photography market seemed to have plateaued a decade ago, the arrival of a dedicated fair suggests that interest in the medium has grown significantly post-pandemic.

Two major Christie's auctions in 2022 signalled the arrival of this new era: Man Ray's *Le Violon d'Ingres* (1924) selling for \$12.4m (with fees), and Edward Steichen's *Flatiron* (1904) for \$11.8m (with fees).

"These sales basically blew the lid off photography and created enormous amounts of pricing ambiguity," says [Bruce Silverstein](#), whose eponymous gallery is participating in The Armory Show. "With extraordinary images that might be \$500,000 or \$700,000, now we wonder, what are they worth? Are they \$1m? Are they \$5m? This huge chasm in pricing discovery represents enormous opportunity."

Silverstein, who learned the language of photography from his photographer father at a young age, remains market savvy, especially at this pivotal moment.

"It's beyond being affordable; it's just extraordinarily undervalued," he says. "But things are changing rapidly, the top collectors are starting to get involved and people are quickly becoming aware that there is this burgeoning field. It's remarkable that you can still acquire works by leaders of history and photography at prices that are dwarfed by those in other media."

Photography is now defined by its ubiquity. Collectors are deeply familiar with this medium, as they can access, edit and upload it in the palms of their hands. Yet it may be this commonality that drives the yearning for more sophisticated imagery.

"There is no other art form that has such an enormous percentage of the population actually participating in the creation process, and these individuals are becoming educated as to those who came before them, and who have influenced the way we all see," Silverstein says.

Rapid crossover

For Helen Toomer, the director of Photofairs New York (and the former director of the Pulse Contemporary Art Fair), a spirit of accessibility and creative collaboration is essential to capturing the renewed interest in photography. "It's not about smoke and mirrors; it's about open arms," she says. "It's about 'Come ask questions and connect.' That is integral to the fair's growth and success."

An important factor fuelling resurgent demand for fine art photography seems to be the widespread interest in digital art, artificial intelligence (AI) and non-fungible tokens (NFTs). Digital methodologies are rapidly crossing over into more traditional photographic formats and the result is a new kind of image altogether, with AI seen as another tool of innovation.

Much of the AI-generated photography shown to date has been ultra-polished, running counter to many collectors' interest in rawness and more historical imagery. The accessibility and immediacy of a physical, printed image remain powerful features.



Damjanski's *Post Human Dog—Murray* (2020), in which the artist has used AI to erase people
© the artist, courtesy of Postmasters Gallery

“Because everyone spent so much time looking at their phones, they’re very happy to be looking at work in person and they’re leaving their phones in their pockets. That [behaviour] was disappearing before the pandemic,” says Tarrah von Lintel, whose Los Angeles-based [Von Lintel Gallery](#) is showing at Photofairs New York. “If you watch most people scroll through social media, it’s done at breakneck speed and there’s no way you could take in the entirety of the image.”

As such, works that do not reproduce well online are given new life in person at fairs and other public exhibitions. Von Lintel believes tastes are shifting away from the small, black-and-white images that are hallmarks of fine art photography, while Silverstein suggests that there is a fresh appeal for more intimate viewing experiences. Either way, everyone is championing unique pieces and experimentation in photography.

AI is now a part of that discourse. At Photofairs, Von Lintel is showing works by the Turkish-French artist Sarp Kerem Yavuz, who used AI platform Midjourney to create his homoerotic series *Polaroids from the Ottoman Empire* (2023). The resulting photorealistic works are completely contradictory by nature, mixing past, present and future while challenging widely held assumptions about both photography and artificiality.

Toomer cites Von Lintel’s showcase as part of the broader conversation about how new technology is changing conversations about photography. “It always comes back to ‘What makes an image? What is truth?’” she says. “These are the questions that people have been asking about photographs since the beginning.”

Other participants will also test the boundaries between lens-based and new media art. New York’s [Postmasters Gallery](#) is showing *Post Human Dog* (2020) by mononym artist Damjanski, which uses AI to erase people from images; and *Horror Chase* (2002), a sculpture by Jennifer and Kevin McCoy that employs cinematic footage from 2002 recalibrated by an algorithm. Lower East Side gallery [bitforms](#) will show a selection of abstract digital works; and Miami-based [Transfer gallery](#) is featuring a selection of Huntrezz Janos’s augmented-reality face filters.

A more analogue type of hybrid that will be on show at Photofairs is woven photography. Von Lintel is showing hand-embroidered *Lovers & Dreamers* (2019-23) landscapes by Lucia Engstrom, where the woven component creates a *trompe l’oeil* effect, giving the image a sculptural dimension. In addition to his more blue-chip offerings, Silverstein is showing works by Sarah Sense, a Chitimacha and Choctaw artist who weaves photographs using traditional patterns learned from her family. These techniques seek to challenge expectations of photography’s documentary and archival uses.

Ultimately, this evolving context is about the intersection of contemporary art with photography, and everyone in the field agrees that the medium is evolving more rapidly now than it has in decades.

“We’re not drawing from light; we’re drawing from pixels. These images are no longer rooted in reality, but rather purely from the imagination of the creator, which is a very important evolutionary step,” Silverstein says. “Photography or image-based art will inevitably be the most influential art form moving forward, and the works that we’re dealing in—these small photographs from history—are the seeds of that movement.”

Toomer and Scott Gray, the founder and chief executive of Photofairs, hope that the fair will not only benefit participating artists and dealers, but the medium of photography itself, providing a space for these kinds of conversations to unfold on a yearly basis. “We’re putting down roots,” Toomer says, and “planting seeds this year”.