

Austin, a Texan City with a Growing Gallery Scene, to Get a New Art Fair in May



BY MAXIMILIANO DURÓN  March 5, 2025 2:46pm



The Loren at Lady Bird Lake.
COURTESY THE LOREN AND FRIENDS OF GALLERIES

Friends Fair in Austin will become the latest event to join the art world’s jam-packed calendar when it launches its inaugural edition on May 15.

Running through May 17, the new fair is the brainchild of a group of five Austin galleries—grayDUCK, Ivester Contemporary, Martha’s, McLennon Pen Co., and Northern–Southern—which created an informal gallery association about a year and a half ago in an effort to be more collaborative. Under the banner of Friends of Galleries (FOG), they initially started out hosting events at their galleries and other Austin venues for collectors and patrons.

“We all have different styles, but we all think thoughtfully about our programming, and we just felt aligned,” said dealer Jill McLennon, who set up shop in Austin two years ago with McLennon Pen Co.

The camaraderie from the FOG events led them to do a more formal annual event. “We’ve been wanting to do an art fair in Austin for a while,” Martha’s cofounder Ricky Morales told ARTnews. “We thought: how can we do something bigger that we do once a year, where we get everybody all kind of on the same page?”

The first edition of the fair will consist of the five FOG members as well as five galleries from outside Austin: 12.26 (of Dallas and Los Angeles), Dutton (New York), Half Gallery (New York), Inman Gallery (Houston), and Megan Mulrooney Gallery (Los Angeles). The fair will also include a room organized by independent curator Taylor Danielle Davis and one for Austin-based nonprofit SAGE Studio.

“Austin is the fastest-growing major metro area in America that, up until now, has not had an art fair,” dealer Megan Mulrooney told ARTnews by email. “Not only have we been excited to participate in its growing arts scene, but we’re thrilled to join our friends to present emerging contemporary artists to young Texan collectors. We’re ready to engage in the spirit of the Texas frontier.”

Morales said they wanted to “start smaller and more grassroots” as a way to “work out the kinks before we expand” for the second edition, often considered the test of a fair’s longevity. Martha’s participated last month in the Felix art fair in Los Angeles, where Morales said he had already received interest from several galleries for year two.

Like Felix or the nearby Dallas Invitational, Friends Fair will also be located in a hotel, the new Loren Hotel Austin, which overlooks Lady Bird Lake in downtown Austin. Morales said the group chose the location because the Loren Hotel, which has an art collection curated by art adviser Penny Aaron and funded the creation of a mural by Manik Raj Nakra at the Contemporary Austin in 2023, has “shown that they’re dedicated to the art scene here in Austin, and that’s why we chose them.”

The launch in Texas is the latest sign that the art market in the state is only expanding. Last year, Untitled, which has long staged a fair in Miami Beach, announced that it would launch a fair in Houston this coming September. Dallas already boasts the Dallas Art Fair and the Dallas Invitational, which take place in April.

“Untitled coming to Houston just made us say we have to do it now,” Morales said. “We figure that we couldn’t wait on this any longer, and we need to make sure that Austin has a good fair to represent our contemporary scene here.”

Austin’s contemporary art scene is only growing, even if it’s much smaller than those of Dallas and Houston. Morales said that the scene, however, is under-known because of the city’s long association with live music, but “Austin has a rich history of visual art,” he said. He hopes the fair will change that, adding that “we’ve seen more of a demand for visual arts in Austin.”

McLennon, of McLennon Pen Co., agreed, saying, “We’ve been talking about how to grow the Austin art scene and get it to the next level because it’s percolating and growing rapidly.”

She moved to Austin in late 2022 after 17 years in New York, where she worked for Sotheby’s, Andrea Rosen, and Galerie Eva Presenhuber. She was looking for a change after feeling burnt out during lockdown. She visited Austin and quickly connected with the city’s other dealers who encouraged her to open up shop.

“Austin feels like it’s growing and changing so quickly, and that was really appealing and exciting to me to maybe be a part of the next chapter of a place,” she said.

She moved in late 2022 and opened her gallery, McLennon Pen Co., within a few months. The gallery’s first exhibition, “Just Friends,” included artists like Korakrit Arunanondchai, Jamian Juliano-Villani, Borna Sammak, Ryan Trecartin, Chloe Wise, and Jordan Wolfson. “With my program,” she said, “I wanted make sure to bring artists from the international scene to Austin.” Two years on, McLennon already has plans to move to a much larger commercial space in the near future.

One draw to Austin for McLennon was that its tech scene is thriving; several companies, including Dell, Tito’s, Yeti, Indeed, and Whole Foods, are also headquartered in the city. She and her colleagues hope to tap into that young energy and turn them into collectors.

“It’s a very young city with people who are of the age where we could get them being lifelong collectors,” she said. “Every time I meet a new person who tells me, this is the first painting they’ve ever bought, I get really excited.”

Technically, Austin got its first fair last year with the Affordable Art Fair, where works sell for under \$10,000. The FOG group chose the May dates to align with that event, with the aim to “offer Austin a different perspective on an art fair with our galleries, so that way Austin can see several different versions of what contemporary art is,” Morales said.

He added, “What people can expect is young galleries, fresh voices, new perspectives in a city that already has a lot of history as being artistic. Now, we want to showcase what we have from the visual standpoint.”