



Contemporary Art A Buyer's Guide

by Phil Harwood

In the first of our contemporary art columns, Phil Harwood, art director of Ascot Studios offers some invaluable advice on how to choose and buy a piece of original, contemporary art.

The Art Market

As a gallery owner and curator, I can say with authority that collecting art is no longer the domain of a privileged minority. Whilst it is true that many of my clients are millionaires, successful business people or seasoned art collectors; an increasing number of working couples, retired people and speculative investors are buying work and engaging with contemporary art in a very positive way. Industry figures for 2006 show a staggering increase in the market for quality original art.

Ivan Macquisten, editor of leading arts' publication, *Antiques Trade Gazette* reported that contemporary art was up by 61 per cent to \$647m.

The recent tabloid ridicule of the Turner Prize winner illustrates how parts of the media are eager to publicise what they perceive to be nonsensical conceptual installations. This derision feeds the public perception of the pretentious nature of art and artists today. Nevertheless, there is growing respect for modern painters working with commitment and integrity. In ever increasing numbers, discerning appreciators are buying high quality, original work produced with genuine passion and talent.

The international cities of London and New York are epicentres of a global art market that is extending throughout Europe into India, China and Russia. Damian Hirst has been cited as the 'flagship brand' of modern art, underlining the huge respect and importance British Art attracts on the world stage. Additionally, the increasing admiration for the tradition of good painting is changing the art market across the provinces in the UK. As a consequence, it is an exciting time for both potential buyers and a relatively small group of credible independent galleries across the UK.

Advice to buyers

The contextual meaning of art is intensely personal and subject to a variety of interpretations. The monetary value is even harder to ascertain, as there is no inherent value for a particular painting other than the value others place on it. Therefore, in order to help people make shrewd judgments when considering investing in art, I have the following advice for potential buyers:

■ Join the gallery mailing list. It's a great way of

getting to know about forthcoming exhibitions and events in advance. This is a free service with no obligations.

■ Do your research. Credible artists will have professional representation and will be featured on the gallery website. Here you should be able to read their artistic statement and view a substantial archive of their work.

■ Ask to see copies of any publications in which the artist has been featured. Also, ask if the artist has received critical acclaim from a respected industry professional. In my experience, quality work has an abundance of supporting evidence from third party observers.

■ Set yourself a realistic budget. Expect to pay in the low to mid-hundreds for a limited edition print from an established artist and up to a few thousand for original works.

■ Reputable galleries will always issue a certificate of authenticity signed by the artist. Expect to receive this within a few weeks of any purchase.

■ Don't be afraid to ask questions of the gallery curator. The curator's role is not that of a salesperson, but is more that of a communicator. They can offer lucid interpretations of the work enabling visitors to make a well-informed decision about their potential investment.

■ Consider commissioning an artist to produce a bespoke solution to your brief, particularly if you have decided on colour, style, size or subject matter. Independent galleries will be proficient and experienced in co-ordinating commission requests.

Help with evaluating artwork

As well as doing some research, allow yourself a reasonable period of contemplation in which to absorb and engage with the artwork in the gallery. It is perfectly normal for potential buyers to seek assurances about the quality and validity of work they are considering purchasing. If you are visiting galleries, talking with curators and artists, there are a number of personal evaluations I would advise you to make regarding the artwork in question:

■ Is the work presented to the highest standards? Strong production values are very important and are usually a reliable indicator of

the artist's level of professionalism.

■ Is the price realistic, based on the track-record of the artist?

■ Is there a 'progressive and forward-thinking' element to the artwork? Is it challenging, interesting, fresh and new?

■ Is there a uniqueness or originality that separates it from other exhibits? Does the artwork show artistic innovation?

In essence, I would encourage buyers to make rational decisions based on research, and to follow their instincts; intuitive purchases can be both an enjoyable and shrewd long-term investment. Ultimately, part of the true meaning, merit and value of any artwork is determined by the kudos of the gallery in which the work is exhibited, the interpretation offered by the curator and the credibility of the artist.

Above all, I would encourage people to enjoy the experience of engaging with contemporary art. People in the art industry often forget the following fundamental principal outlined by the highly respected Czechoslovakian author Lubor Hajek, who wrote: 'The main function of an artistic work, even one not directly created for us but for people of other ages and climes, is to give pleasure.'

Gallery owners, curators, artists and collectors often lose sight of this when they build galleries, articulate meaning, paint or part with their hard-earned cash. Whilst it is true that buying art can be a wise investment, it can also represent an enjoyable life-enhancing decision. The truth is that art can be an inspirational addition to the home; the emotional response it stimulates can genuinely enhance mood and make us approach life more positively. This is exemplified by the fact that businesses are increasingly aware that environmental enhancements in the workplace can increase productivity and efficiency. The question is, is it part of your concept for living?

Phil Harwood is the arts director at Ascot Studios. His gallery in the Ribbles Valley is developing a reputation as one of the North's leading independent contemporary art centres. Successful exhibitors are chosen from a plethora of emerging and established artists throughout the region.

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