

Observing the Art World from Six Feet Away



Visitors wearing PPE stand apart as they view paintings in the National Portrait Gallery, London, as it prepares to reopen following the easing of coronavirus lockdown restrictions across England.

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“The art business changed dramatically overnight,” Harry Hutchison, director of Aicon Gallery, told *Cornell Business Review*. “First, we were in India. We were doing this big show at Bikaner House in Delhi, and around March 20, we realized that the Delhi airport was going to shut down. We had to make an instant decision about where to spend the lockdown, and whether or not we were going back to New York,” Hutchison explained. Aicon Gallery, an art gallery in New York that specializes in modern and contemporary non-Western art, temporarily ceased its operations during the months of April, May and June when the virus had been at its peak. With prominent auction houses like Christie’s announcing their permanent closure of offices throughout the Americas, Europe and the Middle East, Aicon Gallery was one of the few art spaces that remained afloat, successfully navigating its way through unprece-

dent times. Like all other industries, the art world has had little choice but to adapt to the “new normal.” Participating in roughly ten international art fairs and pop-up events a year, Aicon Gallery had to undergo major changes in adapting to virtual showcasing instead. Our talk with Hutchison revealed insight into how galleries are operating, given the new circumstances:

“One thing that Covid-19 did was take away all art fairs, which was a huge change for us. We were supposed to go to Art Dubai after India, but then we found out that it had been cancelled — it looks as though it might be cancelled again in 2021, so there’s really a whole calendar year of lost art fairs which contributed to roughly 30% of our revenue. We lost that almost overnight. We’ve had to adapt and become a lot more virtual. We’ve done virtual exhibitions on our new website, and also on Kunstmatrix. The combination of those two

avenues, as well as the webinars that we do now, are how we're coping."



As gallery exhibitions, auctions and art fairs have moved online, the art world has had to adapt to digitalization, which has not been without its own merits. "It's been great," Hutchison remarked, "it's taken a global pandemic to shake the industry and it means that we've all got to get a lot more tech-savvy, by default." With e-commerce sales skyrocketing on online art platforms such as Artsy and Artnet amongst others, the virus is bringing much-needed refinement to the online buying experience. The art world is known for its opulent dinner parties and glamorous gallery events, which are a large part of its appeal to attracting art collectors and buyers.

The coronavirus has allowed for the market to adapt to a new kind of consumer, the kind who buys million-dollar paintings at home in his or her pajamas, makes business deals online and swaps champagne for caffeine. In due time, the inheritors of trillions of dollars in wealth around the world will form a largely technologically-advanced generation with buying habits that are drastically different from older generations. In-line with millennial buying habits today and the ease of online shopping over the past decade, one can find art online and own it in a matter of seconds. The vast majority of these news-age collectors are a

lot more tech-savvy and comfortable buying expensive goods online. "[We see] a lot of Silicon Valley guys, for example," Hutchison observes.

Upon assuming that art sales had fallen due to the pandemic, Hutchison was quick to correct the presumption:

"It's actually the opposite. For one, people are spending much more time at home. They want their homes to look nicer, they have nothing much else to do than shop online. And so, actually," Hutchison continues, "just last month, there were two works by V.S. Gaitonde, the Indian artist, that sold for \$5 million each, which was a world record for Indian art. So world records are being set during the pandemic. And two, yes, the pandemic is a health crisis but it hasn't affected the stock market as such. It's as high as it was — actually, it's a little bit higher — than before, so that's where a lot of our clients still have their main holdings."



The role of technology in facilitating art purchases is indisputable. Aicon gallery allows viewings by appointment, so that buyers can take a closer look at a piece of art. But when most of its clients are international buyers, how does a gallery go about previewing art during a pandemic? The solution lies in high-resolution images via e-mail, and simply, trust. "90% of our clients are from all over the world. Do they buy



art without being in the gallery to see it? Yes, because they trust us. One's existing client base is always very important, and it's always going to be the heart and soul of the drive for revenue." We can therefore infer that most of those purchasing art during the pandemic are either new, millennial collectors or pre existing clients who have established trust with their gallery.

"Lots of clients have become used to buying art over technology over the past decade so it wasn't a giant leap for them to be comfortable continuing to buy just from JPEGs. So, the gallery world has been able to survive a lot easier than the museum world, because the museum world depends on tickets and people and bodies, whereas the gallery world," Hutchison continues "—that's just not our business model. We don't charge people to come to our exhibitions."

The Met, the MoMA and the Hammer Museum are only a few examples of large institutions that have announced mass lay-offs. Despite a significant decrease in the number of people visiting galleries, galleries like Aicon have been able to survive. As stated by Hutchison, people who come into galleries off the street rarely buy, and the real buyers usually come by appointment. "Having said that," Hutchison added, "it's important for us to put art out there for everyone to see." In fact, Aicon gallery was recently reviewed by the New York Times last month, which Hutchison explained, "is usually a cue for the gallery to be packed," but this time round, "you could hear a pin drop in the gallery."

Given the cancelation of physical art fairs, a replace-

ment has been found in virtual 'viewing rooms,' which still allow for art dealers and collectors to view works. They are an adequate replacement, but its viability in the long term does pose as a concern. "The idea of art fairs is also to network, they're not just about selling. It's about meeting artists and becoming friends with different groups of curators. Selling is one aspect, but is by no means the be-all and end-all. The online viewing rooms, they're obviously just the fairs. So it's a replacement temporarily, but is not really a permanent solution." Art fairs, then, also operate as networking events, where working the room is almost as important as selling works. But it's not all bad news. Despite a calendar year of lost art festivals and revenue loss, costs for galleries have gone down as well. With the lack of travel, galleries no longer have exorbitant shipment costs to take the art to art fairs, resulting in considerable amounts of cost-cutting. Regardless of the changes the art world has gone through, many are optimistic that it will continue to sustain itself. People are buying art more now than ever, and have turned to investing in blue-chip art — an asset class in its own right. "I think we'll get through it," Hutchison muses. "Art is about communication and connectivity. And now, it's more important than ever to feel connected and bond with our various communities." Whether the digital art world will take over the physical one, though, is difficult to say. Considering the nature of what is being purchased — art — the physical experience is quite important, particularly because of the social engagement involved within the purchasing process, which cannot be replicated virtually.

Pearls of Wisdom from Natvar Bhavsar

Apart from economic implications and how the industry is faring from a business perspective, CBR found it valuable to interview an artist to view the pandemic through a producer's eyes. Natvar Bhavsar is an Indian-American artist based in New York City, noted as an abstract expressionist and color field artist. Bhavsar's paintings appear in more than 800 private and public collections, including the collections of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Met, the Guggenheim, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney and the Library of Congress, amongst others. His works also feature in the private collections of the MoMA, and the Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University. Bhavsar presented *Sublime Light: On the cusp of the 1980s*, a solo exhibition at Aicon Gallery from September to October (2020), carried out in 'pandemic' fashion; heavy social distancing and viewings by appointment. Through a series of questions, Natvar Bhavsar, in a conversational style as scintillating as his art, allows us to glean how the pandemic is affecting the most crucial people in the art world — the artists.

What do you see as the role of art in a time where the world has been ravaged by disease, and has experienced a flux of social movements?

In times of catastrophe, we cannot allow oppressors to have power through their destruction. We can and will build a more beautiful world. People will always dance, and people will always sing, and they will always write and paint despite all of these things. The role of art, therefore, is to create ripples, and stir emotions, and allow the world to have beauty in times that are filled with ugliness.

You recently had an art show exhibited at Aicon gallery. How was that experience for you?

The difficulty of having a show during this time is that the atrocities in the world today make it difficult to have any kind of celebration while so many around the world find themselves in mourning, but I suppose that revelation is a continuous need. I wish that people could come and enjoy it with me but I understand that that's not possible at the moment.

A lot of your work is renowned for its textures, colors, and overall physical experience. How do you feel about the way art is being presented online and through images?

In a way, it creates a hunger for seeing it presented in

the way it is meant to be. It's like someone you know saying, 'I went to this beautiful island, you have to go and see it,' but you don't have the money to buy the tickets, so you wait until you can. But that shouldn't stop you from your desire to experience seeing pictures of it. And in this case, engage with it digitally. One always wishes that horrendous inflictions like the coronavirus would not happen, but life continues, and the idea of participating in the flow of life is what's essential. As long as the art continues to make ripples from wherever it is. It really feels like sitting in front of a vast lake and flipping a stone into the water, not knowing how far the ripples will go. I don't know how many people will make the effort to go see the works, but that doesn't mean that you should stop throwing that stone.

Have you used the pandemic as inspiration for your art? What is art to you?

Well, I don't work or create my ideas based on thoughts or outside influences. Creating art, for me, is more like walking in the wilderness, you're drawn to something intuitively. You don't end up obtaining what you are really seeking. You might go looking for berries, but then all you find is mushrooms. Art is similar, it is about exploration and the unknown. I spend 18 hours a day in my studio, and the charge of that activity lets me get completely carried away in my artwork. Paintings are about color and energy. I'm trying to present an experience, a story. Sharing a taste of the elements. For an artist, creating a work of art is like trying to present the universe on that piece of paper. With the first mark you make on it, you're creating a journey without even realizing it. And once you make that mark, it draws you in and you intuitively know what to do. //

“**People who paint are like poets, and the art is the prose, the story. I come to the studio, there is a canvas and there are colors. And I have so much to say. I could go on painting for thousands of years.**”