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upfront

up against the wall

Searching for her first painting, Rebecca Johnson learns as much about herself as art.

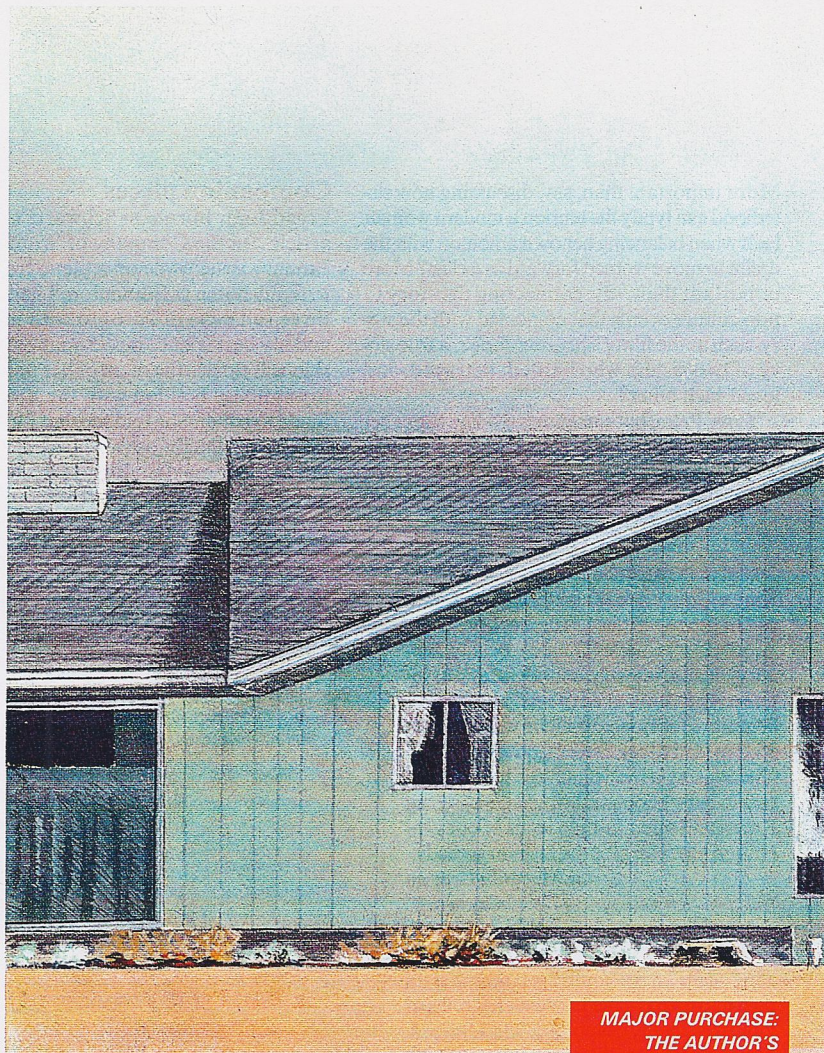
Furnishing my new house was easy. I have sat on couches, eaten from tables, slept in beds my whole life. I know furniture. A year after I bought the house, the rooms are filled with things to sit on, but the walls are another story. They are blank. White. Empty. Denuded, if you want to get fancy about it. Sometimes I tell myself I like them that way. It's a look, I think, batting around terms like *minimalism* and *post-minimalism* in my head, but deep down, I know it's a lie. The walls are empty for one reason: I am afraid to buy art.

Once, I imagine, it was easy. You bought a painting because you liked it. It looked good over the couch. It didn't clash with the drapes. Walk into a contemporary art gallery today and say, "I'm looking for something in a pale green about yea-high to go over my couch" and you'll be laughed out of SoHo or Chelsea or whatever formerly blighted urban neighborhood happens to be the new place for galleries to set up shop. As one rather self-important dealer, who insisted on calling herself a "gallerist," a word Robert Hughes once called a "ghastly neologism," told me, "Nobody buys contemporary art to decorate their house. They buy it because they want a piece of history." Not me. I just wanted something easy on the eye but not too insipid. I was imagining a Rothko. (In my dreams. A Rothko easily sells for \$6 million.) I decided to conquer my fears, go forth, and exchange money for art.

There are, I quickly learned, two ways to do it: the galleries and the auction houses. Buying art at auction from a firm like Sotheby's or Christie's is like buying a diamond at Tiffany's. You pay more, but you can be reasonably certain it will have some resale value. Since I'm no Rockefeller, I worried I wouldn't be able to afford anything, but I had heard the houses were "democratizing," a move occasioned in part by their decision to take their businesses public. Sotheby's has a

Web site, and both houses have instituted auctions in which many of the works sell for less than \$10,000. At my first one, I could see right away that the work was better than what I had seen while wandering willy-nilly into galleries, but I could also see I was in way over my head. Trying to figure out the art world by going to an auction was like trying to understand the Middle East by reading the newspaper. Nothing made sense. Ugly paintings were priced high. Beautiful paintings were priced low. I recognized a few names—Andy Warhol, David Salle, Alexander Calder—but even I could see the work being sold was minor.

Worst of all, I couldn't help feeling disappointed by the event itself. In my mind, art auctions were glamorous, black-tie affairs, attended by ruthless billionaires and a bejeweled duchess or two. But this auction looked more like an AA meeting. For one thing, it was held in the inelegant morning hours and was sparsely attended by people who came and went as they pleased, including a few tourists who openly consulted maps when they grew restless. Afterward, I went to visit Tobias Meyer, head of contemporary art at Sotheby's, for some advice. Cool, suave, and Germanic, in a fine blue suit, Meyer threw water on my plan right away by pointing out that contemporary art is actually the most expensive kind. "The people making money today," he explained, "want to buy contemporary art." He urged me, however, to keep an open mind about what I wanted. "Do you want to buy a painting," he asked, "or a work of art?" "A painting?" I ventured. He frowned. Wrong answer. "Be open," he counseled. "Five thousand dollars buys a very young painter, but for that amount, you can buy a photograph at auction that will hold its value." I asked who he liked among young artists, but as soon as I did, I could see it was a mistake. Even if he had strong opinions, he wouldn't tell me. More than any other, the art business is fueled by hype and *up front* ▶ 104



MAJOR PURCHASE:
THE AUTHOR'S
NEW, UNTITLED LANE
TWITCHELL.

speculation, and Meyer praising one painter over another would be like Warren Buffett praising one stock over another. At least, that's what I surmised. What he actually said was "I wish I could predict who'll be the next great artist, but I can't. Who knows? Look at the seventies; there were hundreds of artists represented by hundreds of galleries, but very few survive."

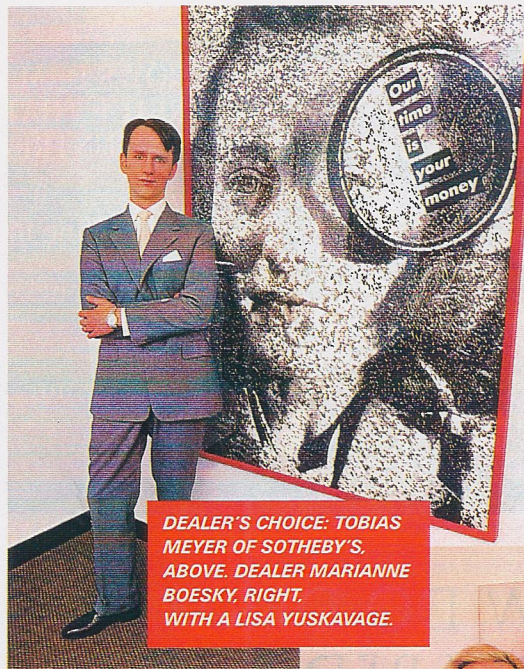
Meyer was, however, the first person to alert me to the idea that you are, in a sense, buying the artist, as well as the art. You want to know, for example, where that person is in the arc of her career: Is she old? Young? Has she gotten into the right shows—Documenta, the Biennale; has she

been reviewed? You even want to know what her personality is like. A genius like Jackson Pollock can get away with being a drunken jerk, but that might hold a lesser light back. Most important, she has to be passionate about her work. As Meyer said, "To be a great artist, you've got to stay committed for a long time. You've got to keep painting, otherwise people lose interest. It's like acting. If you just do one or two movies, people forget. But artists are already great by the time they get to me. A gallery owner would be more likely to know the next great artist."

With Meyer's advice in mind, I went looking for a gallery owner who specialized in young artists. I chose Marianne Boesky because she is young (32), a woman, and because I secretly liked the irony that her father is Ivan Boesky, the infamous risk arbitrageur of the eighties whose insider trading landed him in a federal prison. As Boesky herself pointed out to me, the fortunes of the art world are closely tied to Wall Street. When the art market crashed in the late eighties, many people blamed it on the bloated prices Wall Street types had paid for artists who had been overhyped by greedy gallery owners. As she says, "You can't buy for investment; you have to buy for love."

Boesky has a law degree, cropped platinum hair, a dog the size of a Harley-Davidson, and what seems like a genuine passion for art. Like Meyer, she warned me off painting per se. "You know what they say," she said. I didn't. "Painting has died a hundred deaths. It will never go away completely," she added, "but there aren't that many great painters out there. People are much more influenced by film and video now." I made a face. Does anyone actually buy video? "Mostly institutions," she admitted and then pointed wistfully to her current exhibit—videos of self-besotted Bohemians bobbing for apples. "I know there's no way this artist is going to sell, but I showed it because I think it's important."

Among her own artists, Boesky seemed most enthusiastic about Lisa Yuskavage. "She's referencing Tintoretto and Bellini in her



DEALER'S CHOICE: TOBIAS MEYER OF SOTHEBY'S. ABOVE, DEALER MARIANNE BOESKY, RIGHT, WITH A LISA YUSKAVAGE.

"Buzz" is that ineffable tone, unheard by an outsider, that informs the difference between a good buy and a bad one



painting," Boesky said, handing over some color transparencies. It did my heart good to hear the names. Finally, artists I understood! Unfortunately, I found Yuskavage's subject matter—young women with bulbous breasts, flowers in their chignons, hairy pudenda framed by bikini tan lines—deeply yucky. She was a good painter, but why paint the girls from the mud flaps of cross-country truckers? "It's nostalgic for the seventies," Boesky explained. "Back when porn was still about beauty."

Porn was never about beauty (that's

its beauty), and I ultimately came to see the jarring subject matter of Yuskavage as emblematic of the problem with contemporary art. You can't get any attention unless you're doing something original, but it's almost impossible to do anything original with paint, so talented painters have got to paint shocking subjects in order to get noticed.

"I don't know," I said, handing the slides back. "What would it say about me if I had that painting on my wall?"

"Contemporary art is about what you find interesting in the culture," she answered. "You can't worry about what other people think."

It was good advice, and I decided to follow it. I would not worry that my opinions were too conventional or too bourgeois. I would be honest. I would tell the truth.

In the end, it didn't matter whether I liked Yuskavage, whose canvases sell for up to \$30,000, or not. There were no paintings available, and even if there had been, Boesky might not have sold one to me anyway. She says she sells almost nothing to people who just walk in off the street. It's all about having a relationship with someone and placing a piece of art in the right hands. "You're my ideal collector, but in the beginning you have to show your commitment to me; it's like two dogs getting together and sniffing each other." I found it hard to believe that I, impecunious I, was her ideal collector and that she didn't happily sell to whoever came along, but she insisted, "I work for the artists, and I have to think of their careers long term."

It was all getting to be too much: soft-core porn selling as high art. Dealers who wouldn't sell. Opinions I was supposed to ignore. I needed help. I had resisted the idea of hiring an art *up front* ▶ 110

upfront

consultant for the same reason I would never hire a personal clothing shopper: I'm much too proud to hand over an aesthetic decision to a stranger. Besides, the process of discovery is part of the pleasure. But the clothing metaphor didn't really work. I don't really love to shop; besides, I've been buying clothes my entire life; which may explain why I've never bought a proper painting—as Gertrude Stein once told Ernest Hemingway, “You can either buy clothes or buy pictures. . . . No one who is not very rich can do both.”

Purists may turn up their nose up at the idea of an art consultant—it lends itself too easily to the stereotype of the nouveau riche clod trying to buy himself some culture—but it's not a new phenomenon. Mary Cassatt encouraged her wealthy patrons to buy the Impressionists, and critic Bernard Berenson would actually arrange sales, but here in America, with millionaires as common as Hondas, it makes sense that someone has actually commodified the niche.

There are, I soon learned, consultants who work for corporations, others who buy for billionaires, even ones who lead tours of Long Island ladies into SoHo and cajole them into buying stuff that baffles them. I ultimately settled on Kim Heirston, a 34-year-old Yale alumna who has worked in the art world since graduating from college. Heirston is tall, beautiful, intelligent, and elegantly dressed in Chanel sweater sets, but I really knew I had made the right choice when she suggested we lunch at Balthazar and then gave me its private, unlist-

An art consultant can shield a client from the attitudinal depredations of the dreaded art dealer

ed number. The art world thrives on this kind of insider knowledge.

Over lunch, Heirston explained how she had grown disenchanted with the gallery system, in which, on the one hand, the gallery acts as a de facto free museum (a valuable service with museums charging as much as \$15 a ticket), but one whose existence is predicated on the tenuous bond between artist and dealer. For an artist, the odds against getting a gallery are overwhelming,

but once an artist starts to sell well, there's little to keep him with the gallery that discovered and nurtured him. Heirston also spoke about how difficult it can be for a dealer to keep exhibiting an artist whose work has begun to sour. As a consultant she is free to work with whomever she chooses, whenever she chooses.

On our way to the galleries she had chosen, we stopped in front of a storefront gallery where the windows were crammed with colorful paintings that smelled vaguely, but wrongly, of high art, the kind of work you might see in the waiting room of a dentist in Boca Raton. “I know this art is bad,” I said, “but why?”

“It's derivative,” she explained. “That's a copy of a Léger; that's a copy of Magritte. If we went inside, they'd probably tell us that this painting costs \$5,000, but it really has no value.” When we passed a young African-American man in dreadlocks who had lined up a set of Basquiat-like canvases against a brick wall, she gave the ultimate advice: “And don't buy off the street.” (Good for hot dogs and art.)

We visited a handful of galleries that afternoon to view what Heirston called “blue-chip emerging artists,” people whose work had been consistently well reviewed, who were selling in the \$5,000-to-\$30,000 range and who had elicited “buzz,” that ineffable tone that cannot be heard by an outsider but informs the difference between a good buy and a bad buy in art. Buzz was, for example, the difference between an amorphously shaped watercolor I admired by a middle-aged female artist who shall remain unnamed and a remarkably similar

amorphously shaped watercolor by an artist named Jorge Pardo. Both cost the same. “She is a well-respected, solid painter,” Heirston explained, “but there's not going to be a lot of surprises in that career. Jorge, on the other hand, is great. He could be a genius.” So I might be able to get my money back someday if I bought Jorge Pardo but probably not if I bought the woman? Heirston demurred,

something she did often when I would try to pin her down on hard-core prognostications. Sometimes I felt she was like the Magic Eight Ball: “Will this artist

be a star?” “Maybe yes. Maybe no.”

One useful thing a consultant can do is shield a client from the attitudinal depredations of the dreaded art dealer. We were standing in the back room of Deitch Projects listening to Jeffrey Deitch, who has made a name for himself showing artists like Yoko Ono and Jeff Koons, explain why he was attracted to the work of a 30-year-old British-Italian artist named Vanessa Beecroft. “She's looking at the body in a new way,” he said, gazing at an oversize



KIM HEIRSTON, ABOVE, WITH A JUAN USLE PAINTING. LEFT, LANE TWITCHELL IN HIS STUDIO.



photograph of a skinny model wearing a red, sequined Gucci G-string, stiletto heels, and nothing else. The photograph was taken by Mario Sorrenti at an event “conceptualized” by Beecroft at the Guggenheim. The price of the photo was \$6,000. I had to bite my tongue not to point out that there was nothing new about an attractive naked woman in high heels and a G-string. For proof, all he had to do was take a cab to Forty-second Street. And fashion photographers had been doing it for at least a decade. But I didn't say that. It would have been rude. Instead, I feigned interest and asked if a photograph that was twice as big as the others cost the same. Deitch giggled. *upfront* ▶ 112

"Yes," he said, rolling his eyes, "we don't charge by the size here." I felt my cheeks burn, but Heirston, God bless her, came to my rescue. "Well, Jeffrey," she said, "a lot of galleries do." I smiled a fake smile and started edging toward the door.

A block away, we passed a man who said hello to Heirston. It was cold, but he was wearing only a T-shirt and he seemed oddly ebullient, though his gait had an awkward, rolling quality, as if somebody had slipped a screwdriver into his shoe. "Substance abuse," she said, shaking her head after he passed. "It's too bad, because he used to be a very good artist." That was when I began to develop cold feet. What if I spent a lot of money on an artist who turned out to be a junkie?

I had begun to hear about a thriving art scene in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where real estate was still cheap and artists could find lofts to live in and galleries to show their work, like SoHo 25 years ago. I asked Heirston about it. She, too, had heard of it but had never been to those galleries, which made sense. Heirston may have her doubts about the gallery system, but she has to make a living. Her standard fee is 10 percent of the purchase price, paid for by the seller. Ten percent of a \$100,000 painting bought at Mary Boone's gallery is a lot different from 10 percent of a \$1,000 painting bought in Williamsburg. But she was game.

A week later, we met on the stoop of Pierogi 2000, a cramped, windowless gallery wedged between industrial warehouses in Williamsburg. Inside, we met Joe Amrhein, the owner, a laconic, laid-back guy in glasses, jeans, and work boots splattered with paint, who runs his gallery as a kind of anti-gallery. He declines to even use the verb *represent* when describing the 40 or so artists he shows. But the most unusual thing he does is maintain file drawers filled with works by almost 350 artists. Some of them are represented by galleries in Manhattan, but even so, Amrhein said, most galleries don't bother with drawings or smaller-scale painting because they don't make enough money on the sale. Amrhein takes only 20 to 30 percent of the sale price instead of the usual 50 percent and was happy to let us browse through the drawers while he ran an errand. Heirston, who used to look at artists' submissions for a living, plowed through the stuff like a professional. "Interesting," she'd say when she approved, and "Not so interesting" when she didn't.

"What about this?" I asked, holding up an abstract, Rothko-like oil by an artist who had been recommended by a friend.

She made a face. "Pretty." She dragged out the syllables so I could tell exactly how she felt about anything pretty. "Very Turner-esque, but not interesting."

"Why?" I asked.

"No new ideas," she explained. "She handles paint well, but I've seen that painting a million times. I think you'd get bored with it."

I replaced it reluctantly. When Amrhein returned, I asked what he thought of the painter.

"Very Romantic."

"See?" I said to Heirston when he turned his back. "He liked it."

"Do you think *Romantic* is a good word in painting?" she asked. Hmm. Good point.

It was Heirston who came across Lane Twitchell. "I like these," she said. I looked over her shoulder and fell in love with a small eight-and-a-half-by-eleven-inch oil on paper, the side view of a teal blue suburban house under a storm-gray sky. Maybe it was the way

it stood out against all the abstract, conceptual stuff we'd seen, or maybe it was because it was so Hopperesque and I have always loved Hopper. But mostly I think it was the sky. There is a quality of sky in the American West—vast, empyreal, melancholic—that you learn to recognize if you spend any time there. Having spent my childhood on a farm in the Texas panhandle, I recognized it right away. What's more, the painting was laughably cheap. In the hundreds, not the thousands. Also in Twitchell's file were a few elaborately filigreed paper snowflakes. "That's his new work," Amrhein said. I was dismayed. How could somebody who painted with such feeling be doing cutouts?

Serious buyers often make what is known as a "studio visit" before buying a painting. It lets the buyer suss out the painter's personality, learn about the work, and feel like part of the art scene. It can be a real pain for the artist, but Twitchell was young enough (31) that I guessed (rightly) he would be willing to meet with me. I found him in a temporary downtown studio. He was a gentle, thin young man with huge hands and a passion for art so intense that I had to stop myself from taking a step backward when we shook hands.

I was, it turned out, right about the Western sky. Twitchell was born in Utah, to Mormon parents, but came East to study painting in graduate school. It was there he perfected the suburban painting I so admired. As we sat in his studio, he talked about being influenced by Hopper and the formalist grids of Mondrian and Barnett Newman and how he was interested in ideas of the West and Manifest Destiny and how it was important to him that his art be accessible to his accountant father and homemaker mother. Yes, yes, yes, I listened, agreeing. I, too, had once been enthralled with the same ideas. Then he dropped the bomb. "It had vast appeal," he went on, "but ultimately that became the problem. I could have done them, but so could a lot of other people."

Twitchell could, in other words, probably outpaint anybody, but he had looked at the history of painting and concluded that there was nothing new he could add. At the same time, he had taken a long, hard look at himself and asked, "What makes me different?" His answer was his religion. "Mormonism," he concluded, "was my ace in the hole." It sounded funny to my ears. We like to think that artists are visited by their inspirations, like succubi in the middle of the night, but in fact, they can be quite calculated. He went on to show me how the snowflake cutouts were constructed from Mormon esoterica, like the beehive (the state symbol of Utah), television sets (invented by a Mormon), and Segoe lilies (the state flower of Utah). I made all the right appreciative noises, but deep down inside, they left me cold. I'm Episcopalian.

I left Twitchell feeling strange. Here I had gone to the artist looking for explication and (perhaps unconsciously) gratitude toward me for choosing his work and, instead, I had found what felt like repudiation. The work, he implied, was derivative. Second rate. For a moment, I felt no better than the dentist from Boca buying the fake Léger. A visionary would go for the snowflakes, but no, I had gone for the fake Hopper. Then I remembered Boesky's advice: You can't worry about what other people think. So that's my Lane Twitchell on the wall over my couch—small, pretty, derivative, but I like it. And who knows? Maybe one day it will be worth something. Two months after I met Twitchell, Jeffrey Deitch signed him up. I guess he thought Twitchell was looking at snowflakes in a new way. □

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