

The Art World Goes Local

In a shaky global art market, collectors stick close to home; shopping for Midwestern masterworks.

By [KELLY CROW](#)

From Bloomfield Hills, Mich., to Turin, Italy, contemporary-art collectors are passing on works by international art stars and skipping far-flung art fairs and auctions. This year, they're buying local.

In Detroit, major collector and steel company executive Gary Wasserman says he's stopped buying works by England's Anish Kapoor and China's Yue Minjun so he can focus more on buying "powerfully Midwestern" art by artists like Brian Carpenter, whose \$1,000 photographs often feature images of dead deer, Lake Erie nuclear reactors and snowy footprints. Swiss collector Guy Ullens, widely known for his vast collection of Chinese contemporary art, says he's also started buying landscapes by Swiss and German painters like Anselm Kiefer to hang in his home in the Alps. Italian collector Pierpaolo Barzan says the only contemporary art fair he's attending this season starts next Friday in Turin, where he hopes to find work by Roman artists like Nicola Pecoraro and Pietro Ruffo.

"I believe that I can put together a much stronger collection, and make an impact in the art world, by collecting local artists rather than trying to find the next Chinese star," Mr. Barzan says.

At the height of the boom, art collectors scrambled to acquire works by top artists from rising markets including China, Russia, India and the Middle East. A serious approach to collecting meant trips to London, New York and Hong Kong several times a year for auctions, and mandatory stops at the art fairs in Cologne, Miami Beach, London, Shanghai and Basel, Switzerland.

Now, a full year since the recession gutted the global art market, collectors are canceling their trips. Some Westerners are now loath to dip into markets like Russian or Indian contemporary art, whose prices soared during the boom but whose long-term value is less established. Many are cutting back on expensive art-buying trips. And some collectors say they're interested in supporting local artists, particularly at a time of economic hardship—the cultural equivalent of buying an American car instead of an import.

On Tuesday, Christie's and Sotheby's begin their major round of fall art auctions in New York, and their offerings have already been calibrated to suit the mood. Neither house is including any Chinese pieces in their closely watched evening sales, a reversal from recent seasons.

Brett Gorvy, Christie's international co-head of postwar and contemporary art, says the company decided to shift Chinese pieces to sales in Hong Kong. "There's been a reluctance in the U.S. and Europe for these works but the appetite is still strong in Hong Kong and Taiwan," he says.

The New York sales for both houses also include no Indian artists, with the exception of Mr. Kapoor, who was

born in Mumbai. Mr. Gorvy says top examples of Indian art were scarce this time around.

Instead, both houses have packed their catalogs with works that traditionally appeal to U.S. buyers, like Alexander Calder, Jasper Johns and Joan Mitchell. Tobias Meyer, Sotheby's world-wide head of contemporary art, says the house added artists with strong regional followings, like sculptor Germaine Richier, who is heavily collected in Belgium, and Juan Muñoz, a favorite in Spain. Overall, the houses expect to bring in a combined \$427.5 million to \$606.8 million from their sales of Impressionist, modern and contemporary art, up from \$404.8 million in May but down from \$728.9 million last November.

Collectors began retrenching to artists from their respective cultures in the last few months. Last fall, Americans took home a third of the art offered at a Christie's sale of Italian art in London. They only bought 4% at a similar sale two weeks ago.

Jo Backer Laird, an art lawyer at Patterson, Belknap, Webb & Taylor and Christie's former general counsel, says auction houses are continually shuffling their rosters to keep up: "If one major collector in Des Moines is buying an Iowa artist or anything from the Midwest, you can bet the auction houses are paying attention to that."

Miami Beach has emerged as home to one of the world's biggest contemporary art fairs, drawing artists, dealers and collectors from around the globe. Miami vintner and collector Dennis Scholl says he and other buyers in his hometown are now "circling back" to take a closer look at local artists. He has acquired works by Miami artists like Daniel Arsham, whose sculptures evoke melting glaciers and stairwells to nowhere, and Leyden Rodriguez Casanova, a sculptor who turns suburban furniture like sectional sofas into impassable forts.

Mr. Scholl says he is "running, not walking from the whole China/India art thing," because he thinks such works became overpriced during the boom. He is still buying work from other internationally known artists, like Olafur Eliasson, but he makes a point of hanging their works alongside examples by local artists, thereby "imparting equal dignity," he says.

Marjorie Ornston, a Los Angeles photography collector, has flown to art fairs in Paris and Miami Beach and belongs to the Photograph Council at the J. Paul Getty Museum. But last weekend she jumped at the chance to sift through bins of daguerreotypes, wanted posters, and California streetscapes offered up by struggling local dealers in a one-day sale at Dawson's Bookshop in Los Angeles. She paid \$475 for a midcentury color photograph of a young Mexican odalisque, a "great price" considering the work's unusual history, she says.

The shift could be a cultural boon for artists in cities like Atlanta, Austin and Detroit that have been overlooked by the art establishment. In Austin, dealer Lora Reynolds seems like a market anomaly: Sales at her eponymous gallery are "much better" this year than before the market crashed, she says, in part because she expanded into a bigger space and broadened her base of Austin collectors. "We weren't hit as hard by the crisis, and collectors here still want art," Ms. Reynolds adds.

Works by artists who are primarily known regionally and are carried only by local galleries, of course, are typically far less expensive than those by artists featured in major auctions and art fairs, or in galleries in New York or London. Los Angeles collector Lenore Schorr says buying at a local gallery also often means saving on "pain-in-the-neck costs" like insurance and shipping.

Collectors may also feel more of a personal connection to artists who live nearby. Mr. Wasserman, the Detroit collector who also sits on the board of Miami's Wolfsonian Museum, buys "electric" abstracts by Beverly Fishman. Ms. Fishman runs the painting department at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in nearby Bloomfield Hills. Mr. Wasserman calls her regularly for art-buying advice, and recently donated one of her works to the Toledo Art Museum.

Some collectors are wary of the buy-local trend. Belgian collector Mark Vanmoerkerke says he might seem overly nationalistic were he to exclusively collect Belgian art, especially since artists in other parts of the world may be making stronger work at any given time. His collection is more broadly focused around post-conceptual art

made in the U.S. and Europe.

The process of defining artists by a single geographic signifier can also be a minefield since artists often travel widely and have varied ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

For artist Colby Bird, going home to show in Austin felt like moving forward. The son of a mortgage broker and investor left Texas at 18 to study art in Colorado and later at the Rhode Island School of Design. Around two years ago, he joined a New York gallery and the Whitney Museum of American Art bought several of his photographs and prints, including one depicting a mattress on top of bags of flour.

When a gallery in Austin called Okay Mountain invited him to do a show over the summer, he was surprised by the large turnout at the opening, which included internationally known artists like Justin Lowe and Troy Brauntuch. The hometown setting also inspired him to make a 28-foot-wide banner that said "Swagger" in the purple and black colors of his alma mater, Lyndon B. Johnson High School.

Earlier this month, as he returned to Austin to be part of another show at Lora Reynolds, he called the high school and asked if he could donate the banner. "They were psyched," Mr. Bird said. "The basketball coach said, 'We could use some swagger right now.'"

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