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ART SY

Why Artists Change Galleries

Annie Armstrong
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Vaughn Spann, *Point of Entry*, 2018



Vaughn Spann, *Cosmic Symbiote (Marked Man)*, 2019

Gallery representation seems to already be the hot-button topic in the art world in 2020. Conversations among the cognoscenti on Twitter have turned recently to debates over how to interpret the growing momentum of mega-galleries' roster expansions. Most conspicuously, Hauser & Wirth announced the representation of heavyweights Henry Taylor, George Condo, and Simone Leigh in the span of four days earlier this month, bringing the total number of artists and estates on the gallery's roster to 91. The day after Leigh's announcement, New York Times art critic Roberta Smith proclaimed: "What is an art gallery with enough cash and perks to sign every artist it wants and to hire all the handlers and staff required? It's a talent agency, not an art gallery."

There's a multitude of reasons why an artist might change galleries, most of which have not changed since the 1960s golden era of mega-dealers like Leo Castelli. Perhaps it's the allure of more exposure, wanting to be associated with a different movement or set of artists, access to a different collector base, or something else entirely. With mega-galleries and blue-chip dealers seemingly scooping up as many artists as they can, the art world is asking questions about what it really means when an artist switches galleries.

To be fair, the practice of moving from a small gallery to a larger one is quite common. It's a standard and expected practice when an artist's career advances. The allure of a larger gallery isn't just in the name: It often comes with more artist liaisons, more exposure through fair participation and the foot traffic that comes with a better-known space, guaranteed books and articles through increasingly ambitious in-house publishing enterprises, a different echelon of artists to directly learn from, and so on. Though, to remain fair, the implications of an artist leaving a smaller gallery have grown more tense as mid-size and smaller galleries have been shuttering left and right in recent years.

When moving up pays off

Earlier this month, mega-gallery Pace added Beatriz Milhazes to its roster, one of the first artists to join the gallery since the opening of its new eight-story Chelsea headquarters. She will continue to be represented abroad by Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, Galerie Max Hetzler, and White Cube. "She will still work with her previous galleries, and we've become a kind of additional asset," explained Simon Preston, a senior director at Pace. He added that "we can offer things that perhaps aren't offered elsewhere."

One of those things Pace has offered in the past has been an immense upward market trajectory. It was reported that prices for Loie Hollowell's work have risen by 1,200 percent in just three years, and those numbers continue to grow. Unlike Hollowell, Milhazes's work already sells in the millions at auction, so with a powerhouse like Pace showing her work, she is already prepared to work with numbers of a certain caliber.

"We do have some extraordinary artists that we'll be announcing in the coming months that are all contemporary," Preston added. "This will hopefully make Loie feel like less of a . . . or it will be built around her point of career. Pace has managed to do very well by her, so we want to replicate that." On Wednesday, the gallery dropped one of those announcements: the powerful abstract painter Torkwase Dyson.

Artists find their match

One emerging artist who signed to a new gallery last year, Vaughn Spann, tells other artists who ask him for advice to practice patience. "When you're a young artist, it's easy for the vultures to come pick you off," said Spann, who signed with Almine Rech last summer. "But you really just have to be savvy and be patient and feel out those relationships. When you do finally settle with a gallery, it is like a marriage."

His first show with his new gallery, "The Heat Lets us Know We're Alive," opened at Almine Rech's New York space on January 15th. Explaining his decision to join the roster, he said, "I was looking for a gallery that's professional and has a positive reputation for paying the artists and helping [build] a career."

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Sustainable growth

Keith Mayerson, an artist with Marlborough Gallery who also serves as chair of drawing, painting, and printmaking at the University of Southern California, said he's had students such as Nate Lowman, who joined David Zwirner in 2019, "who have just gone to the moon." He added, "You have to have a really good head on your shoulders. Hopefully you're taken up on the chairlift ride of acceleration, and your work is seen by many and maybe your auction prices even rise—hopefully not artificially."

That fear of an artificial rise in auction prices is likely a lingering effect from the "Zombie Formalist" movement that began in 2014, in which the work of early-career artists such as Tauba Auerbach, Lucien Smith, and Oscar Murillo exploded in price, plateaued, then nosedived. Many of the Zombie Formalist artists' careers haven't fully recovered. In 2019, in a similar economic upswing, mega-galleries began tapping atypically early-career artists (like Hollowell joining Pace, or Nicolas Party joining Hauser & Wirth), prompting speculation over what a sudden boost of that amplitude will mean for an artist's career, and if the effects may echo what happened with the Zombie Formalists.

"If you're fortunate enough to work with a gallerist who really believes in you, and believes in what you do, you would want to stay with that person," Mayerson said of staying loyal to one dealer. "If they're working with you in a considered way, there'd be no reason to go." "Alternately," he added, "if a gallery can give you greater audience, and that's what you seek, or greater possibilities to exhibit and show your work, then that's something to consider."

"There's no one rule"

The approaches dealers take in how they bring on new talent often vary, and can inform what sorts of artists join their roster. Todd von Ammon, who opened his own gallery in Washington, D.C., in 2019 after working for several years at New York's Team Gallery, called his onboarding process a "slow burn" of relationship-building that takes place over several years.

"I'm sure that many people work in a much more impulsive, instinctual manner and just try to capture whatever energy or hype is in front of them," Von Ammon said. "I might be richer if I did that, but the most gratifying thing about having a gallery to me is forming these really, really strong relationships."

Meanwhile, Preston said Pace takes a mixed approach to adding new talent. "There's no one rule," he explained. "Some of these take place over an enormous period of time, and some happen over the period of a weekend. It's just the nature of the beast."

So is there really a clear-cut reason for an artist to switch galleries? There are many variables; career level, exhibition history, and economic status all play a role in determining why an artist might want to make the switch. For galleries, the prospect of a soaring career, increased sales, and the potential for bringing a rising star to fame causes some to cast a wide net, take a chance, and put their seal of approval on someone who might be the next big thing.