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Armory Show Dealers Are Mixing Old, New Works Behind the Scenes

(The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of Bloomberg.)

By Carol Kino

March 7 (Bloomberg) -- This week, some of the world's top contemporary-art dealers will come to New York's Armory Show with pieces fresh from the studio, many made expressly for the event. Increasingly, though, many of those dealers are becoming known for reselling older art.

Take the two galleries that got prime placement at last year's Armory Show on the Hudson River piers. At the head of one pier was New York's David Zwirner, admired for its stable of contemporary heavy hitters like Belgian painter Luc Tuymans and the German photographer Thomas Ruff. On the other pier was Hauser & Wirth of Zurich and London, an equally hot contemporary shop that represents Swiss video artist Pipilotti Rist and other major artists.

Together, the galleries control a significant amount of important new work, known in art circles as the primary market. But their principals, Zwirner and Iwan Wirth, also are partners in Zwirner & Wirth, a gallery in a townhouse on Manhattan's Upper East Side that focuses on reselling previously sold art, known as secondary-market sales.

Zwirner has been involved in the secondary market since opening his initial gallery in SoHo in 1993, at the nadir of the art-market recession. As the market came roaring back, however, it became too confusing to sell a luscious lily painting by Georgia O'Keeffe and a Jason Rhoades installation powered by a Chevy V8 engine at the same location.

``I thought I should try to separate these activities physically," Zwirner says. ``We would have these amazing works of art pass through the gallery -- O'Keeffe, Dan Flavin, Clyfford Still -- and nobody would see them."

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As the market grew stronger, Zwirner got more requests to resell work, including some pieces by Ruff and Tuymans that he'd sold only a few years back. Opening another gallery to handle resales allowed him to control his artists' future placement while also capitalizing on the rising value of their work. (Zwirner says a Ruff photo that sold for \$14,000 in 1999 would now sell for \$150,000, and a Tuymans painting priced at \$8,000 to \$16,000 in 1993 could sell for \$1 million to \$2 million.)

Unlike most secondary-market dealers, Zwirner often gives living artists a cut when he resells their work. He sometimes uses his two galleries to mount simultaneous shows for the same artist, selling new work in Chelsea and older pieces uptown.

``You don't want to be in competition with your own stable," Zwirner says. ``You want to develop their careers and generate sales and generate income for them, which you don't do in the secondary market."

Primary Market

Because the Armory Show is dedicated solely to the primary market, Zwirner's booth will feature new work by Ruff and another gallery artist, the Los Angeles-based Christopher Williams, known for multimedia pieces.

Many dealers use the resale market to generate extra income to support the sale of less-profitable, newer works.

``The main reason is to pay bills," says New York gallery owner Jack Tilton, who is involved in both markets. ``Say I have a young artist and I sell the show out and I make 50 grand. My overhead's higher than 50 grand, so I have to do more activity - -and it has to be secondary. Selling a Picasso is a lot easier than selling emerging artists, unless it's a hot emerging artist."

Toilets and Tiffany

Before moving his gallery from SoHo to East 76th Street last year, Tilton was known for offbeat offerings like a video of performance artist Patty Chang lapping water from the floor of a toilet stall. But these days his front room is more likely to stress previously sold works such as those in last year's ``Tiffany/Pollock" exhibition, which paired Jackson Pollock's splatter-field paintings with Tiffany stained-glass windows, lamps and vases.

Some dealers are crossing over in the other direction. Perry Rubenstein, a former private dealer who used to handle postwar and contemporary masterworks, opened two Chelsea galleries in 2004 that promote new discoveries such as Danish video artist Jesper Just and Matthew Day Jackson, an American installation artist whose work is now on display at the Whitney Biennial. Last fall, Rubenstein opened a third space to mount historical exhibitions.

Exhibiting emerging artists along with established figures can help boost prices for the new works, which is probably why contemporary dealer Jay Gorney joined forces with resale specialists Mitchell-Innes & Nash last year. They now have a branch, near the Metropolitan Museum, that generally shows work by modern masters and a gallery in Chelsea often used for exhibitions that mix historical and contemporary work.

Old and New

In an interview before the Armory Show, Gorney said his booth would very likely have new work by gallery artists like the sculptor Jessica Stockholder and the photographer Justine Kurland. But he might also sneak in a few secondary-market pieces by the cult filmmaker Jack Goldstein because ``he's of vital interest to young artists."

``Here's the art dealer's rule: `If you can sell it, sell it,'" says Marc Glimcher, president of New York's PaceWildenstein, formed in 1993 through the merger of a contemporary gallery and an Old Masters specialist. ``The people who don't follow that rule don't stay art dealers for very long."

The Amory Show runs March 10-13 at Piers 90 and 92, on 12th Avenue at 50th and 52nd streets. For more information, call (1)(212) 645-6440 or see <http://www.thearmoryshow.com/index2.php> .

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