

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Financial Times
Gallerists take positive steps to survive the crisis
Melanie Gerlis
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Gallerists take positive steps to survive the crisis

Plus: fast sales on Zwirner's Platform; free advice on the impact of Covid-19; looking ahead to fairs



Image: Jessie Homer French's 'Seasonal Fires' (2013) © Courtesy the artist and mother's tankstation Dublin, London

The gallerist Ben Brown has moved out of Hong Kong's legendary Pedder Building because, he says, he was unable to secure a meaningful rent reduction. Businesses in town have been hit by both the Covid-19 crisis and the protests that shut down activity in central Hong Kong last year.

Brown was one of the first overseas galleries to open in the colonial era Pedder building in 2009; other dealers to move in since include Gagosian, Lehmann Maupin and Pearl Lam. The narrow, labyrinthine block has a scruffy feel, and its quirkiest tenants have included a cigar shop and a muddled toy store. But it boasts high ceilings — a requirement for most art galleries and a rare feature in the high rises of Hong Kong's Central district.

Brown says that the adverse environment forced a rethink and he has instead found a space in a converted factory building in Wong Chuk Hang, an area on the south side of the island that is also home to Rossi & Rossi, Axel Vervoordt, Pékin Fine Arts and De Sarthe galleries.

"It's a bigger space that already works as a gallery and is a good way to maintain a holding pattern for when we can have a show again," he says. He is not sure when that might be but says that Hong Kong is gradually opening up again. Christie's, Sotheby's and Phillips all currently plan auctions in town during the week of July 6.

The format of Platform: London, for which 12 relatively small galleries offer two works at a time through the website of the multinational dealer David Zwirner, seems to work a treat (davidzwirner.com until May 15). "It's been brilliant. I've made completely new contacts and sold work already," said Sid Motion soon after last week's opening. She is showing paintings by Max Wade (£4,500 each).



Image: 'See Saw Sea' by Max Wade (2019) © Francis Ware 2020

Sales of work by Jessie Homer French were also reported by Finola Jones, director of mother's tankstation, including two fire paintings to the same collection (\$15,000 each). "It's really helping things to happen and enabling dialogues to continue without putting too much pressure on clients," says Kate MacGarry, who has works by the Berlin-born painter Florian Meisenberg (priced up to £23,000 at time of writing). Zwirner's gallery reports its highest website traffic week of the year.

Other online collaborations have also proved productive for smaller galleries and their emerging artists, including Preview London, a tie-up between Bosse & Baum (London), Clima (Milan) and Damien & The Love Guru (Brussels) that ran on the Artland website between April 7 and 21. The plan is to grow the concept, "slowly and organically",

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by inviting more participants, says Alexandra Warder of Bosse & Baum. They sold work by the London-based artist Mary Stephenson, including her timely painting of a toilet roll, "Running Low" (£500), which was made to benefit the UK National Health Service's Covid-19 Appeal.



Image: 'Running Low' by Mary Stephenson (2020) © Bosse & Baum

The London gallerist Stephen Friedman has signed up three new artists this month: Holly Hendry (b.1990, London); Marina Adams (b.1960, New Jersey) and Leilah Babirye (b.1985, Kampala). The multiple signings aren't a coincidence, as the gallery celebrates its 25th anniversary this year and he wanted to "prepare for the next chapter".

He describes the work of all three as having a "rough beauty", highlighting Hendry as a rising star in British sculpture and the abstract work by Adams as "bought by sophisticated collectors". Of Babirye, whose work Friedman first saw at the Nada Miami art fair, he says "I have never made such a quick decision about an artist in all my 25 years." Babirye, who works with discarded materials including ceramics and metal, had to flee her native Uganda to seek asylum in New York after she was outed as gay by a newspaper. Friedman shares her

representation with New York's Gordon Robichaux gallery, while Adams is also represented by Salon 94.

Friedman didn't deliberately seek out female artists but, he says, "under-appreciated artists are always of interest and, I'm afraid, there is still a great number of unrecognised women out there".



Image: 'Namasole Nakatya (Queen Mother of Ssekababka Mwanga ii)' by Leilah Babirye (2018) © Courtesy Gordon Robichaux

The analysis firm ArtTactic has produced a free-to-read guide to some of the financial, legal, tax and insurance implications of the Covid-19 crisis, tailored to galleries and other art businesses and available at arttactic.com. Helpful contributions from the law firm Constantine Cannon, the accountancy group Rawlinson & Hunter and the insurance brokers Hallett Independent include an explanation of force majeure and how it could apply, scenario planning for non-payments, cash-flow advice and some of the implications and requirements when it comes to leaving a gallery space unoccupied.

It's difficult to imagine managing one art fair just now but Becca Hoffman, the former director of the Outsider Art Fair, has taken on three: Art Aspen (July 23-26), Sofa Chicago (November 5-8) and Art Palm Springs (February 2021). The fairs comprise the holdings of Intersect Art and Design, an event partnership owned by the brothers Tim and Dirk von Gal and where Hoffman is now managing director.

"I'm very lucky to have such an opportunity at such a time," Hoffman says and — music to the art market's ears — she adds that she is in hiring mode. "We have to tread cautiously, of course, but I am keen to find ways to stimulate the arts community," she says, without confirming if all three fairs can run as planned.

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Either way, she says, refocusing events back towards their host cities is key — for the Chicago fair, she plans a section for local designers and makers. The New York dealer Andrew Edlin, owner of the Outsider Art Fair, says he too is on the lookout for a new director for its New York and Paris events. “We’re optimistic we can land someone with Becca’s dedication,” he says.