

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Art Basel
What is 'COVID collecting'?
Brian Boucher
9 February 2021



What is 'COVID collecting'? Hint: watching and learning, but sticking with the tried and true for now

While some of the changes of the last year have been welcome, and online offerings are crucial, collectors are unanimous: There's nothing like the real thing.

The past twelve months have been a time like no other in living memory, with the COVID-19 pandemic curtailing normal activities for so many. The art industry has adapted, as art fairs and dealers pivoted, along with so many other industries, to an online existence as we sit out the time until widespread vaccinations put this historic spell behind us.

Art collectors the world over have watched eagerly as art fairs and galleries have reinvented themselves. They, too, have had to alter their ways, and a kind of 'COVID collecting' has emerged. The watchword is caution, as collectors observe and wait, staying with the familiar for now.

In a rare and welcome bright spot, Art Basel and UBS's 'The impact of COVID-19 on the Gallery Sector: A 2020 mid-year survey,' authored by Dr. Clare McAndrew, Founder of Arts Economics, indicated that fully a third of high-net-worth collectors surveyed were actually significantly more interested in art than before. After all, they have more time to pursue their passion while locked down at home, scrolling on Instagram, visiting art fair Online Viewing Rooms, and checking out galleries' beefed-up online presence.



Image: Denzil Forrester, *Swarm*, 2020. The British painter's work is part of Los Angeles-based collector Joel Lubin's collection. Copyright Denzil Forrester. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.

Los Angeles collector Joel Lubin is living proof. 'In the beginning of COVID, I was curious about how the pandemic would impact people's engagement with fine art given the practical restrictions of only seeing art online,' he says. 'But, of course, we adapt and, for me, looking at art, in any medium, has been somewhat meditative. As a result, I'm actually spending more time looking at art and discovering new artists than I thought I might.'

But has this period altered collectors' habits of learning about art and discovering new artists in a lasting way? Or will they snap back to their pre-COVID customs as soon as they can? What changes in the way the art world does business have they found salutary?

Some seasoned art collectors shared their observations of the art world from their respective perches at home around the globe, and a consensus quickly emerged. While they have taken advantage of enhanced online offerings, they deeply hunger to experience art in person. 'Seeing art in person and meeting with artists in their studio is not an experience that can be replaced with a virtual one,' Lubin pointed out.

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Art Basel
What is 'COVID collecting'?
Brian Boucher
9 February 2021

These collectors may have learned about a great deal of new art on their screens, but they are holding off on collecting unfamiliar artists via clicks.



Image: Antony Gormley, SET V, 2019. Mumbai-based collector Shyamal Bodani acquired the British sculptor's work in November 2020. Image courtesy of the artist and White Cube, London and Hong Kong.

'What I have bought is artists who were already on my radar, whose practice and whose work I was already familiar with,' says Mumbai-based collector Shyamal Bodani. He finds that online fairs and enhanced gallery websites have been helpful—

up to a point. 'If you can't experience art in person, the impact just isn't there,' he says. As such, he hasn't considered the work of any artist whose work isn't familiar to him. 'Not one purchase,' he says.

Athens-based collector Harry David is of the same mind: 'I looked over my records for the last year,' he says. 'I made only one purchase of an artist whose work was new to me.' An art fair booth conversation can have a certain serendipity: 'Let's say you start talking to a dealer about work by Lisa Brice,' he said, gesturing to the artist's work on a wall behind him during a Zoom conversation. 'But then you end up also talking about something else. That just doesn't happen in the same way online.'

So he's waiting to get back on the art fair beat, as well as visiting galleries and artists' studios. But in the meantime, he has found his own kind of 'COVID collecting.'

'One angle I've pursued,' he says, 'is work that has been affected by COVID. You see artworks influenced by the way that artists are living under quarantine. For example, Rashid Johnson's Anxious Red Drawings. Since I was familiar with him it was very easy to take a position on work like that.'



Image: Left: Toyin Ojih Odutola, Routine Inspection, 2019. Right: Rashid Johnson, Untitled Anxious Red Drawing, 2020. Both works were acquired by collectors Harry David and Lana de Beer recently. Courtesy of the Harry G. David Collection, Athens.

Lubin, too, has tracked the impact of the massive shift on artistic production.

'I suspect that when we look back on this time period,' he says, 'we will see it as a moment that inspired some very dynamic art, fuelled by both the profound turbulence so many have faced, and, for others, the collective pause that allows sustained time for contemplation.'

With vaccine rollouts proceeding unevenly across the globe, on-and-off lockdown remains the norm for many. Bodani hasn't travelled more than a fifty-kilometer radius from home in a year. There have been baby steps, like Mumbai Gallery Weekend, which kicked off January 14, where he was 'thrilled' to see art in the flesh.

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Art Basel
What is 'COVID collecting'?
Brian Boucher
9 February 2021

But while we will get back to experiencing art in person together soon enough, collectors and dealers alike predict that the pandemic will bring on some long-term changes. McAndrew's report found that dealers may reduce art fair participation; there were already 'debates over the density of the calendar.'



Image: Joana Choumali, *There Is No Finish Line*, 2019. The Ivorian artist's mixed-media work is among the ones that entered David and de Beer's collection recently as well. Courtesy of the Harry G. David Collection, Athens.

Collectors strike a similar note.

'I do believe that when everyone feels safe again there will be a pent-up desire to travel and congregate and see art and other cultural happenings,' says Lubin. 'It is just human nature. And at the same time, we will have learned how to be more efficient and when to experience things virtually versus live.'

To collect international art, collectors travel internationally; Harry David will also resume a lot of business travel post-vaccine, he says. But by necessity, he's taken a lesson from the last year.

'I don't need to travel as much,' he says. 'Maybe I'll pick what is relevant and really important to attend in person.'

And there may be more lasting and profound impacts on the art market of the last year, says Bodani. The first of Art Basel's Online Viewing Rooms in March last year may have set a precedent by publishing price ranges for every artwork on offer, inaugurating an increased democratization of the industry.

'Hopefully,' says Bodani, 'the era of opaqueness in the art world is over.'