



## THE LONG GAME

The past two years have laid bare the artworld's ambivalence toward change—but but reminded us of the many dealers playing the long game to ensure it does.

By MICHAEL ADNO



For centuries, questions of loss, mortality and identity have been central to the most haunting works of art and literature. And in the past two years as the pandemic crept around the world, questions of loss, mortality and identity seem bound up in every decision, action or thought that belonged to us. It's been a long season of mourning—eternal protest, political grief and questions—everywhere. As the writer Zora Neale Hurston wrote nearly a century ago, “There are years that ask questions and years that answer.” For gallerists all around the world, there's been renewed focus on just how their programs and artists articulate those questions and what, if any, answers they have.

Over the course of 38 years, Wendy Olsoff, co-founder of P.P.O.W. in New York City, paid careful attention to her artists, narrowing the focus of their program to suit their artists rather than become swept up by the tides of the market. “I really looked to my artists and followed their lead,” she says, whether it was civil rights, the environment, feminism, gay rights or issues surrounding race. And while that program, which includes David Wojnarowicz and Carrie Mae Weems, took shape over decades, Olsoff says it didn't come easily. “I think in the long run the art game is a long game. There were many times where we thought: Why are we doing this?”

In the past two years, the pandemic has revealed the fault lines of inequity, racism and inequality that undergird the artworld's most cherished institutions, and in turn, it's forced many commercial galleries, museums and dealers to reckon with just what questions they're willing to address. At times, that's been evident in decades of programming such as P.P.O.W.'s, and, of course, there's been superficial attempts too. Those threads have become tangled up in the abrupt end to travel, the exponential growth of galleries' physical footprints and what seems like an incessant string of bad news. “We're not coming out of anything,” Olsoff says. “We're in the midst of something.”

For Stevenson Gallery, based in South Africa and Amsterdam, it's been a chance to step back from the half-dozen international art fairs strewn around the world, a rhythm that one of the gallery's partners, Joost Bosland, says “seldom syncs with that of the studio, leading to an unsatisfactory dance between galleries and artists about which works will be ready when.” He points to the past two years as a set of lessons that while Stevenson remains committed to international fairs, its commitment to models that serve their artists rather than the other way around remains paramount.

The sentiment held true for Javier Perés, founder of Peres Projects based in Berlin, who helped several artists relocate to Berlin just as ►



Xaviera Simmons, *Sundown (Number Nineteen)*, 2019





borders began to close in 2020. It was a matter of making sure the artists they worked with were “OK and able to focus on what they needed to focus on,” Perés says. But just as the pall of the coronavirus drew across Europe, it gave way to a summer of protest in America in the wake of George Floyd’s murder by police, of Ahmaud Arbery’s execution, of Breonna Taylor’s killing. Calls on museums to dismantle their boards, retool their collections and more equitably use their endowments grew into a fever pitch. It was centuries of history culminating in the streets, in the #metoo movement and in this big question of just how the contemporary artworld could meaningfully reflect the contemporary world.

“In America and Europe, it seems like all of a sudden galleries and collectors, and even museums, realized that there’s Black people and women in the world,” Perés jokes. “It seems like they’re still not fully aware that Latin American people exist.” But beyond the thin attempts that some institutions and dealers have made to signal change, Perés still senses hope. He hopes these past two years will lend a newfound sense of urgency to galleries in how they develop narratives from all around the world and maybe more pointedly to look further outside their purview.

For Chicago-based dealer Mariane Ibrahim, the last two years lent her clarity. She felt the pandemic had transformed how she understood the

role of gallerists in supporting their artists, and that it carved out time for her artists to truly focus on what stories they were telling. “As many of the artists are dealing with a duality of cultures, either being from Africa and Europe, or America and Africa, these forms of identity, that were often questioned by modes of the pandemic, have been ingrained more deeply in the artists’ practices,” she says, adding, “Art has never been deemed so important.”

But as stringent policies were set in place to curb the spread of the coronavirus, seeing art in person became something like a ghost. For Simon Cole, co-founder of Cooper Cole Gallery in Toronto, technology became central to their program ▶



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as they weathered one of the longest lockdowns in North America. Remaining visible, as it was for everyone, meant staring at screen after screen, taking collectors through their space via FaceTime, and coming up with solutions for online exhibitions that naturally suited some artists' work and poorly represented others. And as so many other dealers have alluded to, it was a welcome pause. For Cole, it allowed him to reconsider the role of education in their programming, so in lieu of meeting face to face, the gallery started hosting conversations and panels tied to each exhibition. And while the pandemic and all that's taken place in the past two years hasn't altered their program, it's animated a new language of how we see and think of art

without being able to see it in person.

And where the American South meets the subtropics, Miami-based David Castillo looks back on the past two years as merely a speed bump in what amounts to decades of bad road. "I don't feel it has really galvanized my program or what I do as a gallerist or as a person, because those are things I've done from the beginning," he says, looking in the rearview. "The long game for me has always been history. It was never about selling works or which institutions would buy them or what collectors would support them. The long game was always with a view of history."

And that view of art extends well beyond the course of two years, takes root deep in the past

and ultimately lends itself to truly ask questions that help us better understand the world. "We still talk about museums trying to follow a narrative of this moment," Castillo says. "But again, it's important to look at history: What did those institutions do for decades prior? What did those institutions do for more than a century and beyond? How do you shift narratives that are that old, that are that ingrained in the culture of a society? How does that shift in a way that can be felt by individuals who were excluded traditionally or historically?"

"We're only now seeing the very beginning," he adds before pausing. "And if those beginnings develop into something more concrete, time will tell." •



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XAVIERA SIMMONS  
NAVIGATES THE  
ENTIRE TERRAIN

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CURATORS, COLLECTORS,  
GALLERIES & MUSEUM  
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## STATE OF THE ART

MUSEUM HYBRIDITY,  
MARKET REPORT &  
THE FUTURE OF FAIRS AS  
THE WORLD REBOUNDS

SOURCE MATERIALS