

THE CANVAS

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Lunch at The Mark *with* Dominique Lévy

Over a surprisingly leisurely paced lunch at The Mark Hotel on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, The Canvas recently had the opportunity to sit down with the very gracious Dominique Lévy, co-founder and partner of the ever-strengthening powerhouse of a gallery, Lévy Gorvy.

The gallery, which recently announced its third exhibition space in Hong Kong (in addition to the two preexisting gallery spaces in New York and London), has a unique organizational structure that is built on a robust advisory practice. Comparing it to the “old-fashioned private bankers in Switzerland,” Dominique takes us through the steps upon which the gallery is structured, the ins and outs of how she spends much of her time, and her vision behind the gallery’s seemingly ceaseless expansion plans. All this, while ensuring that the gallery puts the art and artists first and foremost at the heart of its mission.

At the same time, she also explains why she’s not trying to compete with the international mega-galleries that have been dominating the art world over the past few years. Indeed, she put up a robust defense of medium-sized galleries, and issued a call to arms for fairs in general -- and Art Basel in particular - to “have the courage to change” in order to protect the legacy and viability of the often “squeezed middle” galleries.

With a scatter of Nahmads heartily enjoying their salads at the table next to us, Dominique, eloquently lamented the pernicious influences of exclusive artist representations at the biggest galleries, generously shared her thoughts on the market

heading into 2019, pragmatically discussed the recent spate of high level departures at the auction houses, as well as the potential icebergs she sees heading the art world's way over the next few years. Moreover, she advised that the entire art community take a more serious sense of collective responsibility for the art and artists we all claim to serve. Dominique's uncanny ability to speak in long, beautifully constructed paragraphs - a trait shared with her partner in the gallery, Bret Gorvy, allowed The Canvas to bask in her elegant Swiss presence, while allowing the interview to essentially write itself.



● *The Canvas*: What's a typical day like for you?

Dominique Lévy: A typical day for me doesn't exist. But I can walk you through the type of day that I like, or the type of day that I strive to have. I usually wake up pretty early. We have a lot of gallery spaces in Europe, so I work with Europe before my young son wakes up. 5am to 7am is generally spent talking to Switzerland, talking to London, and reaching out and working with the staff in Europe. Then it's a sacred breakfast with my son and drop off at school. I try to exercise at least three times a week, and then I'm at the gallery by 9:30am, 10am the latest.

Life at the gallery has no precise or specific days. I would say that if I looked at my overall time in the gallery, it's devoted to three main facets. The first area is exclusively devoted to the artists and the art itself. It's very much working with the estates we represent, the artists we represent, curating the exhibitions we stage, and even curating the booths at the fairs we participate in, as all our booths have an angle or point of view we're trying to communicate.

The second part of my life has very much to do with building the connection we have with our collectors. I value enormously this idea that the gallery is growing more into an advisory practice as opposed to just a place to go to buy and sell art. So more and more we're representing estates, buyers, sellers, negotiating with the auction houses, strategizing how to reformulate collections, determining how to pass collections from one generation to the next, helping our clients look at how to participate on museum boards, etc. That's an enormous part of my daily activity - fostering that conversation with our collectors.

My third area of focus is stabilizing the gallery and ensuring that it's a place rooted in creativity, love, trust, and commitment to the art. These four values are incredibly important to both me and Brett. We really want

to make sure that everyone who works at the gallery – and we have close to 60 people worldwide now – from the first person you meet at reception, all the way up the organization, embodies these four values each and every day. For me, a gallery is not simply a shopping place. It's a laboratory. It's a place where we have readings, we have dance, we have music, and we publish poetry. To me, the ultimate concept is that art has the power to change anyone who comes into contact with it. So, the gallery has to be a place that inspires you, that upsets you, that seduces, and informs, challenges, and attracts you. So, a lot of my time goes into helping to create a group of people that are inspiring and inspired at the same time.

The Canvas: In many ways your career has run parallel to the overall art market over the years. You created and headed the first private sales department at Christie's (which was the first private sales division at any of the major auction houses). You then left and had your own advisory firm. You teamed up with Robert Mnuchin and formed L&M Arts. You parted ways to start your own eponymous gallery. And then you eventually teamed up with Brett Gorvy (formerly the chairman and international head of post-war and contemporary art at Christie's) to start Lévy Gorvy. With the continuing exodus of talent from the major auction houses – be it Brett himself, or Emmanuel Di Donna, or even now, with Francis Outred – do you think we've reached a new era in the market? Has there been a change in the water at the auction houses?

Dominique: I think the market has changed dramatically in the last ten years, and especially over the past twenty years. I entered the art market in my mid-20s and I'm in my early 50s now, and the changes that I've witnessed have been incredibly interesting. The question for anyone working in the art market right now is really how to position yourself, how to remain agile, how to stay creative, and how to ultimately find what's important and what matters. I see the gallery as an inherently entrepreneurial place. I see us as very small – even though we're in many places – compared to some of the mega-galleries, and I want us to stay small.

“ I would like to see a fair that has the courage to change, and the courage to be mindful that medium galleries that have nurtured artists for so long, need to be preserved at all costs.”

To me, talent comes when you put your own name on the line and you become accountable for everything that you do – when things are good and successful, and just as equally when things are difficult and not as successful. I think what's happening now is that the auction houses have become one very transparent, quite sterile model. It's a beautiful tool. We work a lot with the auction houses and I have enormous respect for them. But at the end of the day they are what they are.

If you work for an auction house, unless you're profoundly geared to be an auctioneer or a company person and have your identity tied up with the auction house – and you and I both know some people that will stay at the houses forever – then at some point you'll become burnt-out or frustrated with what you're doing. You're constantly running, and chasing, and telling a story that's not only not yours, but is one that's constantly shifting. “This painting is the best and most rare.” And then six months later it's “No, this painting is actually the most important one”. So, you're telling a story that's not the full truth. You're not really owning whether a market turns or not because clients aren't going to come and say

“Hey Francis, you told me this was worth that, and now it’s worth 50% less” because ultimately, it sold at an auction. You don’t have the same level of responsibility that I think a dealer has. You’re just trading, and quickly filling catalogs, and fighting for market share. You don’t really have the time to self-reflect and look at the art, to have a sense of responsibility and ownership.

The Canvas: Lévy Gorvy currently has two gallery spaces in New York and London, and one soon to be announced space in Hong Kong. You also have these private, client-centric viewing spaces in Shanghai, Zurich, Geneva, as well as a separate space in New York. Can you walk me through the thinking behind organizing the gallery in this way?

Dominique: The model that Brett and I are really basing the gallery on is the old-fashioned private bankers in Switzerland. The heart will always be the gallery which is all about the art and is completely art-centric. These are the live spaces, the laboratories, the genesis for our publications. Then we have spaces that are client-centric – the showrooms in Zurich, Geneva, Shanghai, and also in New York. Those are the spaces where we sit and only look at what the client is interested in, whether it be works from our gallery, or at auction, or in private collections anywhere in the world. The gallery has six full-time researches around the world. That’s a lot of research. And it’s not just for the exhibitions we stage, it’s for the collections we help manage.

To me, the gallery spaces are where our creativity, and our passion, and our taste, and our vision, and our knowledge are all borne out in the exhibitions we stage throughout the year. But when we sit with the clients in these other spaces, it’s purely about our business skills and our knowledge. It’s not our vision, it’s the client’s vision. It’s very, very different because when your buyer is a client for an estate, it’s not about what you like or dislike. It’s first and foremost what the client wants or needs. If it’s a deaccession in an estate or a work passed on from one generation to the next, it’s what the client is passionate about in the process of building his or her collection. In these cases, we have to completely remove our passion from the equation.

The Canvas: Are you trying to compete with the mega-galleries?

Dominique: No, definitely not. I look up to some of those galleries, particularly Hauser & Wirth, because I have an enormous respect and admiration for what they do. To me, they’re an extraordinary international gallery. But even then, I feel that this concept of an absolutely humongous space, a roster of artists, all these publications – it’s extraordinary – but ultimately it comes at a loss. The loss to me isn’t the scale of the gallery. It’s the mentality of exclusivity. I think that this idea of exclusivity is the art world’s biggest mistake right now. I don’t want to have exclusive representation of an artist. I want to collaborate with another gallery and another dealer because I want the conversation that comes from that relationship. I want the artist to not always be in one space, designed by the same architect, always looking the same. I want the artist to be able to show in a small gallery in Chicago and a big gallery in Rome. That conversation is what we’re losing right now and if there’s any place where I would go to bat, it’s for that. We have lost the conversation that comes from differences, and battling, and disagreeing.

The Canvas: Speaking of sharing artists, the gallery currently shares representation of Dan Colen with Gagosian and Massimo De Carlo. When the representation was originally announced, Brett was quoted in ArtNews saying that Dan’s “art works with our taste and client base, which is different from the client base of a De

“I value enormously this idea that the gallery is growing more into an advisory practice as opposed to just a place to go to by and sell art.”

Carlo and a Gagosian." I'm wondering, from your perspective, how does the gallery view its client base? How is it different from Gagosian?

Dominique: I'm not sure it's different. I don't want to contradict Brett, but I'm not sure the word is "different." I think that what happens is we all have, for the most part, the same obvious clients, but then we each have our own particular niche of clients, as well. Gagosian's niche is his niche and our niche is our niche. And I think that our clients, for example are looking at Soulages, are looking at Germaine Richier, or are looking at Gego. And these aren't necessarily the same clients looking at Richard Prince and Takashi Murakami. When we did that project with Dan, I think we were able to open his horizon to collectors that wouldn't have necessarily looked at him otherwise because he was put in a pinhole.

On the other side though, we share Frank Stella with Marianne Boesky and that's a constant conversation. He does something downtown with her and something for us in Hong Kong or at the uptown space here in New York. We share Senga Nengudi with a very small gallery, Thomas Erben, who's been with her forever. We always said to her, "We want to work with you, but you have to stay with Thomas too." I never would say to her, "You have to leave Thomas." It would have been easy to say to leave Thomas, but it ultimately wouldn't have made any sense because Thomas has ten years of grassroots knowledge of how she grew and how she got to where she is today.

***The Canvas:* What about other medium-sized galleries? How can they compete in a world dominated by Gagosian, Hauser & Wirth, David Zwirner, and Pace? Can they even compete in the first place?**

Dominique: I pray they can because if not, I'd rather change careers and become a potter on a Greek island. If we end up in a world where there's just a handful of powerful galleries, and then at the other end of the spectrum, these fabulous, young galleries – a world without Barbara Gladstone, Paula Cooper, and Marian Goodman, then that's very, very disheartening to me. I think we really need to address how these types of galleries, and smaller galleries as well, participate in fairs...



“ I think the worst thing that could happen is that the great ladies end up finishing their careers at the same time. There are three of them- Marian Goodman, Paula Cooper, and Barbara Gladstone. They’re all in their 80s, and I know I wouldn’t want to be running a gallery at 80. So by age and by necessity I think we’re going to see a lot of gallery closings over the coming years.”

The Canvas: That was going to be my next question...

Dominique: But it’s not about how much they pay. I think they should pay exactly the same price per square foot as everyone else. It’s about where they’re placed on the floor of the fair.

The Canvas: I just asked this question to Noah Horowitz last week. He says that they’ve surveyed collectors, and they respond saying that they like to be able to see the galleries in Nova, Positions, and Survey next to one another as it gives them a perspective on the entirety of the curated program.

Dominique: Not true. I am sure this is not true. I think that if he would have the courage to reshape the art fair whereby big galleries and small galleries were placed next to one another, and allowed to have a dialogue with each other, then sure, David, and Larry, and I might all do a little less business for a year or two because it would be a bit difficult for people to find their way around, but it would be so much more exciting. I would like to see a fair that has the courage to change, and the courage to be mindful that medium galleries that have nurtured artists for so long, need to be preserved at all costs.

The Canvas: How does the gallery choose which fairs to participate in throughout the year?

Dominique Lévy: In general, I would like to participate in many fewer fairs. You’ll see us do less next year. I think it’s just too much. Currently we do the three Basels – Miami Beach, Hong Kong, and Basel-Frieze Masters, TEFAF New York in the spring, and FOG in San Francisco. We’ll also be trying out Frieze LA in February. We stopped doing Mexico after two years, as it didn’t really make sense, and we stopped doing the ADAA Art Show. Right now, the only New York fair I want to participate in is TEFAF in the spring. But there’re five fairs (besides Frieze LA) that I’m confirming for next year – the three Basels, FOG, and TEFAF. Everything else we’re thinking about.

The Canvas: How do you view the market heading into 2019?

Dominique: I think the market is larger than we’ve ever understood. I’m selling paintings to people I’ve never heard of and they’re paying within a week. It’s certainly a larger market than ever, but I think we’re perhaps entering a period of a bit more selectivity. I don’t know, I think we’re currently a market that’s been a bit overfed.

The Canvas: Overfed?

Dominique: Yes, overfed. I think there's a bit of an indigestion feeling. Similar to how after Thanksgiving no one really wants another turkey the next day, do they? I think we have a market that needs a rest. Hopefully, Miami will be successful and lively, which is something we all look forward to each year. And then, hopefully, we'll have a break through the holidays and through January, which is traditionally a quiet time. And then, we'll have a better idea of where we stand for 2019.

The Canvas: Are there any particular artists or movements that you see the market gravitating toward in the near future?

Dominique: I think we're going to see people looking at and revisiting different moments. I think minimalism is going to be a focus for a lot of people. I think Agnes Martin is already there but is going to be even brighter in 2019. I also think that people have a thirst right now for serenity and for softness. If you take that gorgeous Georgia O'Keeffe landscape for instance, I think it embodies a bit of the taste that I see some of my clients gravitating towards. I think there's also going to be a greater look to history as opposed to artists that are being hyped in the moment.

The Canvas: Are there any icebergs you see on the horizon? What could the next big shock be to the market or art world in general? Perhaps a big flop at auction? Or maybe another spate of galleries closing?

Dominique: I think the worst thing that could happen is that the great ladies end up finishing their careers at the same time. There are three of them – Marian Goodman, Paula Cooper, and Barbara Gladstone. They're all in their 80s, and I know I wouldn't want to be running a gallery at 80. So, by age and by necessity, I think we're going to see a lot of gallery closings over the coming years. And when that happens, if all these artists just end up going to the very big galleries, then I'm not sure what will happen. We might implode.

The Canvas: Is there anything we didn't cover that you'd particularly like to talk about?

Dominique: I'd like to touch upon the notion of responsibility. Responsibility of the galleries, of the fairs, and of the auction houses. And not just a responsibility towards the market, but a sense of responsibility towards creativity and artists. I think we're not reflecting enough on that as a collective community. We're not nearly aware enough that what we do has an absolute impact on the legacies of extraordinary art, of extraordinary artists, and therefore on culture itself. I don't want this to go down in history as a period where it was all about money, and the price of art, and the price everything.

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