

Nick Simunovic:
Managing Director
Gagosian Asia



Gagosian A Go-Go

High-end gallery comes to Hong Kong

Twenty years ago the world went to New York to shop for art, but in today's shifting geo-cultural canvas, New York goes out to the world. The rise of emerging markets like China and the swelling number of their nouveau riches, combined with the super-scrapping spending power of the Middle East, has shaken the established order of the elite and created a new global art market, where the supply and demand barometer hovers somewhere between Hong Kong and Beijing, as the appetite for Chinese contemporary art has gone through the roof.

Proof of this commercial shift sees the imminent opening of the Gagosian gallery in Hong Kong on the 7th floor of the city's historic Pedder Building. Larry Gagosian, the world's richest art dealer who encourages America's ultra wealthy to buy and sell multi-million dollar masterpieces, has a habit of timing his entrance to markets at opportune moments and Hong Kong is no different; the city has transplanted Paris to become the world's third largest art market by auction turnover, after New York and London.

Gagosian's presence in Hong Kong owes much to managing director Nick Simunovic, who spent five years working at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the latter half of which involved increasing trips to Shanghai and Beijing to organise exhibitions. Sensing the shift in the global art dynamic, Simunovic - like a young Bud Fox pitching Gordon Gekko in *Wall Street* - engineered a meet with Gagosian and suggested that he consider creating a presence in Asia, given several known factors: the gallery's great representation in Asia and the US; the huge appetite for Chinese contemporary art, and China and Asia's growing interest in Western art. Gagosian agreed, Simunovic took the lead and now the gallery's ready to show in Hong Kong in January. - STEPHEN SHORT

How do you choose the launch opener for Gagosian Hong Kong?

We haven't decided yet on the opening artist. The animating principle for the gallery's arrival in Asia, is that we think collectors have been underserved and that the artists that we represent have been underexposed. It's hard for somebody who lives in Singapore or Taiwan or Korea or Hong Kong to get access to artists like Takashi Murakami or Damien Hirst, or Richard Prince.

One principle is to do one thing we do everywhere in the world to the exact same standard of excellence and quality in Asia. As a secondary strategy, by being here in the region, to bring on an Asian artist or two and exhibit them here or in the west, that's also something that we're open to doing.

We want to announce to the collecting community here, both to individuals, corporations and foundations that we're here but to do it in a way which is in keeping with the last three years in Asia. By that I mean, we started slowly, we quietly build a presence, a network, and we want to work in this geography on the collectors' terms. It's less of a, 'Asia, let's show you how we really do this,' and more about demonstrating a level of respect towards Asia as a geography and an area in resurgence.

Who would you like to open with?

In reverse order: the gallery represents many outstanding foundations and estates, but I don't want to open with a dead artist. We will do Picasso, we will do Warhol, we will do Lichtenstein, Giacometti ... we will do all the big names we represent. But I don't want to open with that kind of an exhibition.

I really want to maximise the goodwill, the exposure, energy, the exuberance, the celebratory effect of opening a space in Asia with a living artist. At the same time, a living artist that people know. There are outstanding younger artists, people like Mark Grotjahn, Anselm Reyle, who have some presence in Asia but don't have

the name to mark the launch opening of the gallery. We of course want to do exhibitions with them as well. At this point a decision has not been reached. We have a few artists at our disposal including Takashi Murakami, Richard Prince, Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons, there are major names on the art circuit with big recognition in Asia.

Why the Pedder building?

We're taking the 7th floor of Pedder Building. If you have to put your finger on the heart of Hong Kong, it would be there. It's a gorgeous building, 1944, it's heritage, and it has huge ceilings. The two families that own the building [Tai Kee Leong Co. Ltd] realise they have a wonderful property which has been, by their own admission, underexposed. I think you'll see over the next few years new concepts coming into the building and it will leverage its potential in terms of location. It's a signature building that people know and it's hard to find a continuous 5,000-square-foot-space in the centre of Hong Kong.

It's important because artists' levels of excitement about showing in the gallery in Hong Kong should be the same as their levels of excitement in Rome, Paris, London or New York.

Hong Kong is just an amazing platform from which to reach collectors across all of Asia from Japan or Australia and there's no secret as to why Hong Kong is the world's third largest art market by auction turnover right now. I think you're going to see more and more western galleries come to Hong Kong.

I don't want to sound immodest at all, but I think with Gagosian having been here three years already and now opening, it shows a deeper level of commitment which people will start taking even more seriously.

When did you first pitch your Gagosian Asia idea to Larry?

It was July 26, 2007 and he called me the next day. He was very intrigued, very interested. He said: 'I'm tempted, but I don't just know enough about

the Asian market'. He said we should keep in touch. I left the meeting feeling optimistic but dejected; I was hoping it was going to go a little better than that. But then he called me the next day, when he'd slept on it and said 'let's do it'. That's Larry's way. He decisive and makes his decisions very quickly. My contract started August 2007 and my first day in Indonesia was September 2007.

You started in Shanghai but that didn't work out.

We originally set up in Shanghai, I had a small office, but as it turns out the market in mainland China for Western contemporary art is less advanced than we'd like it to be at this stage, but that certainly will change going forward. There are serious logistical hurdles to opening a gallery in China, whether its import/export, whether its taxation, sales tax, there are serious barriers to entry in China and it's not clear to me that those are maybe going away anytime soon.

After having spent a little time in Hong Kong, it became clear that it would be the best place for us to be, as a free port, as a place where Sotheby's and Christie's have already established in buyers' minds Hong Kong as a place to come and trade. So on a number of levels, it makes sense to be in Hong Kong for logistical and infrastructural reasons.

The appetite for art in Hong Kong is like New York in the 1960's and 70s. Unthinkable not so long ago.

More people today are aware of how culture can play a role in their lives; there are more collectors, whether they buy a \$2000 print or \$2 million Warhol, that is not going away. The overheated market for contemporary art brought speculators into play, but clearly some of those people have now left the market to make fortunes elsewhere. But I think it is going to be a lasting effect, this notion that there are people who realise that contemporary art, culture and design

and architecture can be a part of their lifestyle and that they enjoy surrounding themselves with beautiful things or with provocative ideas, and that it's somehow a reflection on themselves. That I think is a positive outcome of all of this experience in the last decade.

Speculation and what else has been negative in the art market in recent times?

I would say a variety of different aspects. It's not just financial speculation. When people start speculating artists' careers, the artists themselves suffer. You have situations where an artist can meet with tremendous success, perhaps premature success, they are inserted into all kinds of biennales and triennials, their work is everywhere, people start liking their work and then all of a sudden, for whatever reason, these people are, I don't want to say forgotten, but they fall on harder times because there was no sense of building over time. It was just more is more. The more broadly disseminated an artist could get the better for their career and I think that is a kind of speculation. Outside of financial concerns, certain careers have ebbed and flowed as well. I would suggest that would be another aspect. Some of those artists are continuing to wrestle with such things.

Who is the Asian equivalent of Damien Hirst, Banksy, Jenny Saville or even a latent Andy Warhol in China's artworld?

With due respect to Gagosian's other artists, I would say almost all of our artists are Western. We have a few Japanese artists, Takashi Murakami and of course, he is the Hirst, he's the Warhol, he's everywhere. As product designer, as collaborator, as much as Louis Vuitton but also Gagosian. Artists like Zhang Xiaogang still have enormous influence over not just the market but also over taste. If you were to walk into Hollywood Road, Hong Kong, you would see second and third and fourth order derivations of Zhang Xiaogang's work. That's not his fault,

or his problem, he created something very iconic, almost a face for Chinese contemporary art with his *Bloodlines* paintings in the 1990s and it's so pervasive, that people have tried to tweak it and follow it.

The great thing is that there is so much talent, great art is being made everywhere, and people are saying isn't there too much Chinese art, isn't the bubble over and of course the answer is no. I mean there's wonderful art being made everywhere at any given time and that includes China. I'm very much looking forward to seeing what the next generation of Chinese contemporary artists will bring, or the students in art schools right now, who may be completely reconceptualising from the lessons of Cynical Realism and Political Pop and the kind of fathers of Chinese contemporary and I would expect reconfigure it to their own era and their own needs.

What about younger artists catching your eye?

Younger artists work I'm starting to follow more carefully ... Yan Fudong is an artist with a finger on the pulse of the rapidly changing China. I like his work. A Japanese artist named Otura Sato, whose work I quite like, a young fellow named Tobias Madison is based in Switzerland, whose work I like a lot. A young painter named Christian Schollar who's also working in Germany; in China, Jamen Lee's doing extremely well. There's no shortage of great art to discover here and in the West. The challenge is keeping up.

How much is the Internet changing the aesthetic of contemporary art?

Among younger artists I think you're seeing it bleed into the culture more and more. I mean the notion of appropriation has been around for a long time. Dada stole the urinal and that goes all the way up to Richard Prince stealing trashy airport romance novels; the notion of appropriating out of the Internet is one I think which is gaining traction, but I think the short

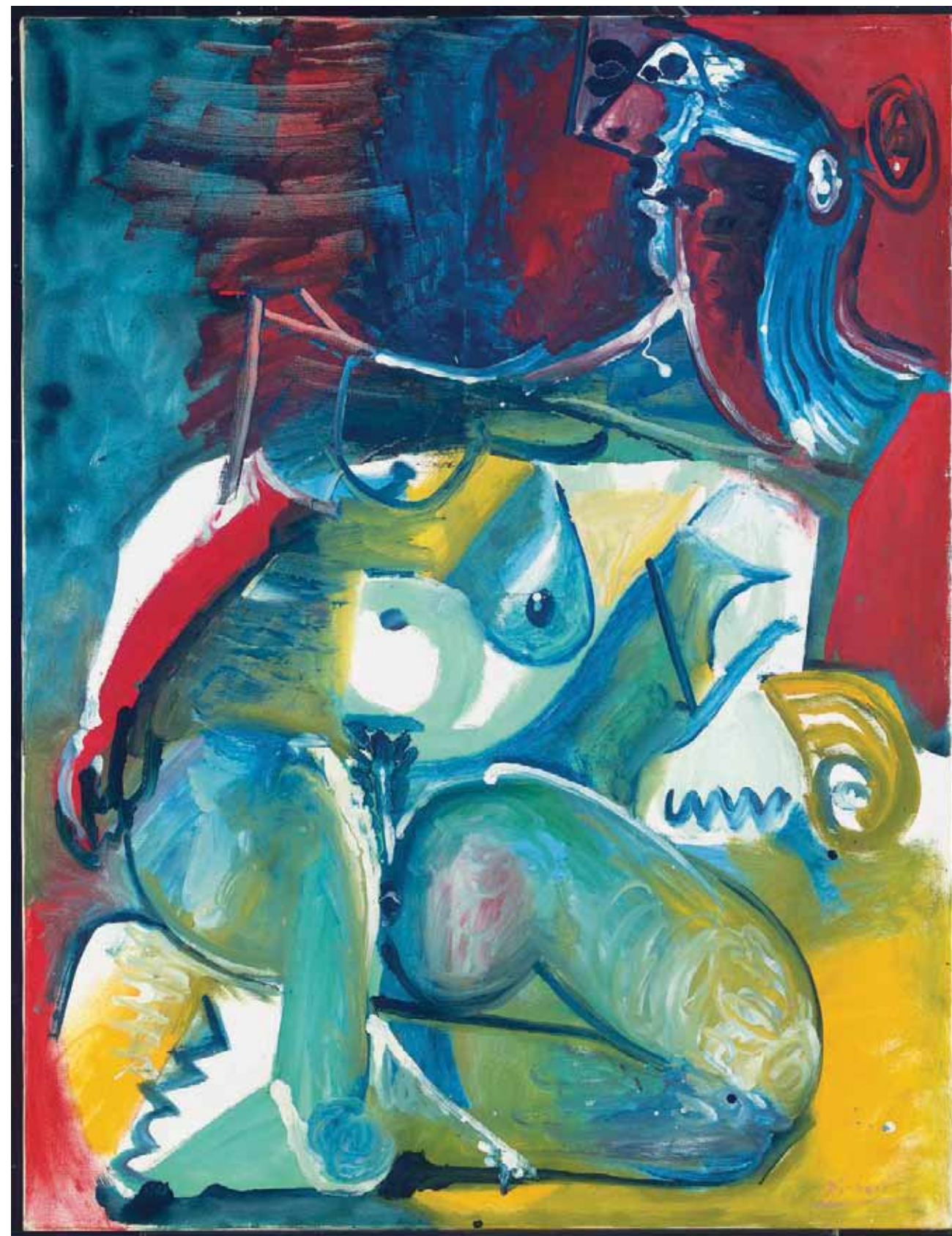
answer is, not all that much.

But there are clearly examples. Feng Mengbo is appropriating video games, images from the Internet, analogues. Corey Arcangel, is another artist, based in Brooklyn, New York who is working with digital media a lot. And Ryan Trecartin, who is most comfortable speaking through the language of the Internet and the Web and his work is utterly confounding and beautiful and funny and surreal and disturbing. It's all a mediation through the Internet. His work is so fertile. Identity today is so fluid, whether it's racial, or national or sexual, people are identity transvestites, flicking around on the Internet, slipping in and out of personas. The work is very powerful and new. This is a direction I think we'll see the contemporary art world and visual culture move more and more into. Takashi is omnivorous.

I still think that art and the way it is enjoyed and paraded and purchased is still relatively old school. Now there's more information about which artist is going where, there is more information about pricing, these price indices, that has had a levelling effect, and brought greater transparency to the Internet, but in terms of artists harnessing the Internet to bring new and hybrid art forms that people are really sitting up and taking notice of, I would suggest that that has not happened.

Where do you stand on David Hockney promoting Apple's iPad through his artwork? Will such interactions change how we look at art?

Apple is first and foremost a tool for consuming media. It is not a productivity tool. I'd still rather have my BlackBerry, but if you're looking at images, you still can't beat ... galleries are still relatively antiquated, the art world is still trying to understand and take the measure of, the ways in which disruptive technologies like iPhone, iPads will transform the landscape. Someone like Hockney thinking directly about making art from an iPad is revolutionary, it's exciting.



PABLO PICASSO *Femme Nue*, 1965 Oil on canvas. Gagosian Gallery

Are you more guarded today as art dealer given how quickly reputations are won and lost in the art world?

The decision to buy art is not trivial, for anyone, no matter how much money they spend. There may be many artists out there whose work won't stand the test of time, but whose work may increase substantially in value over the short term. So there are collectors who are perhaps persuaded to purchase something ... people buy more for investment value than staying power as art. People's motivations for buying art are complicated and complex. But to stand the test of time, an artist needs to show more than one signature style.

People re-read books or rewatch films and find things they hadn't appreciated before. Do you have that sensation with art?

One's sensitivity to visual culture deepens. You bring that to artworks you looked at once, but not since. Take Warhol for example. Andy was very much about surface ... if you want to know about me look at the surface, it's all there. Of course that was a big ruse and a lie because there's tremendous depth in Warhol's work. On the other hand, he's showing you everything his work is about on the surface. The disaster stuff, the Monroe's, the electric chairs. There's a lot in Warhol's work that as you revisit you see this tremendous amount of sadness. I think you see the story of America in a lot of his best work and that is something that occurred to me the more art I saw.

Have you been surprised by the buying/collecting habits of the Chinese since you got here?

There have been clients bought work I would never have expected. I'm totally impressed with the acumen of the collecting community in Asia. I had preconceptions. I thought about 80 percent of our business would be Hirst and Murakami and Warhol, but it hasn't been. It's been all manner of collectors from all parts of Asia looking

for work across all mediums, whether it's painting, sculpture, photography and that's one of the surprises and by-products of what the gallery is bringing here. We're serving the upscale Chinese collector.

Is photography becoming a respected art form commercially?

Photography is going to take more time before it's universally accepted in Asia as something being an art form on a par with painting and sculpture. It would be disingenuous to suggest that collectors here want photography and pursue it as actively as they do painting and sculpture. It's going to take a little bit of time.

I'm not exactly sure what the issues are; a few common themes you hear are about reproducibility, perhaps there's a kind of concern that because it comes from a negative that it could be tampered with in some way. Also, how do you know you're getting just a limited issue of 10 or 20 when it's a photo. I've also heard the idea that humidity and weather conditions in Asia are not suitable for photography, which I also do not buy. I think it's just more of a mindset.

Perhaps as Chinese photographers get more recognition and western photographers find their way more and more into Asian collections then maybe ... but photography does still

have some way to go in terms of collections.

Larry has the 'ear' for the best art, not an eye, do you agree?

I haven't heard that. I would suggest the opposite is true for a couple of reasons. There is no question, artists have been met with success when they come to the gallery. They can see the values of their work increase, because of Larry and his relations with collectors. Larry has amazing instincts, he has one of the best eyes in terms of importance. If you show him ten paintings by an artist he doesn't know, he could rank them in order of importance. He has a superlative eye. His success has come from well-timed information at the right time, I don't know?

He knows there is no substitute

for walking into a gallery and seeing a piece. The broader issue in my mind, is not discovering new artists but being second. We experience the great artists; a guy like John Currin had met with all kinds of success before being invited to Gagosian.

How do you assess the current art market?

Our strategy here was more than just a get rich quick scheme. It's about recognizing a large collecting class that were not getting the access they required, so this was always a long-term plan. Of course when the economy ran off the cliff one year in - Lehman's was our first anniversary - it was troubling, but on the other hand, we weren't overly concerned about it.

That said, the market now is much healthier, there are robust levels of

activity across Asia; the Hong Kong Art Fair did well this past year, not just for Gagosian but other galleries as well. The market is stronger than one year ago, but what's happening with the market overall doesn't really affect our strategy. We're looking more at 10, 15 years into the horizon, not quarter by quarter.

If Gagosian were a fashion brand, which would it be?

More of a Prada than a Versace or Gucci. A refined, kind of simple, but not minimal brand. Larry knows all the celebrities, but the gallery is exceptionally discreet. The clients are some of the most private people on the planet. I think an interest in exceptional quality, exceptional taste with refined, quiet sensibility, Gagosian strikes me as being very Prada.



ANDY WARHOL *Jackie*, 1964 Synthetic Polymer and silkscreen ink on canvas. Gagosian Gallery



RICHARD PRINCE *Leave it to Nurse Kathy*, 2009 Ink jet and acrylic on canvas. Gagosian Gallery



MARK GROTJAHN *Untitled (Grey Face 778)*, 2009 Oil on cardboard mounted on linen. Gagosian Gallery