



(USUALLY) A TRULY GREAT ARTIST IS NOT A GUN FOR HIRE

But for the passionate and ambitious collector, sometimes only a commissioned work will do, as Hollywood aficionados court masters and rising stars and endure years-long waits, arcane contracts and little control to score a unique piece from a sought-after creator

by **DEGEN PENER**
photographed by **NOAH WEBB**



"It definitely feels more personal; less like an acquisition and more like a project," says Naegle of the work created for her by Jansons. They were photographed Jan. 14 at her Ojai, Calif., home.

NOT LONG AFTER they missed the preview for a fall 2015 exhibit at L.A. gallery Various Small Fires, Charlie Corwin, co-CEO of Endemol Shine North America, and his wife, Olivia, regretted it. The first solo exhibition of painter Joshua Nathanson saw his 13 works — super-flat surfaces of people in cartoonish imagery — all presold to collectors before the opening. Nathanson, 39, has two international solo shows coming up, one at Takashi Murakami's KaiKai Kiki Gallery in Tokyo; among those who bought his works from the fall show were CAA's Joel Lubin, former UPN chief Dean Valentine and Murakami himself.

"I have a philistine rule for buying art, which is, if it emotionally moves me," says Corwin. He and Olivia saw Nathanson's work with their art adviser, Sarah Jane Bruce, a week after the opening. "I consider market conditions and resale values and whether an artist is on his way up, and then I throw all that out and go with my gut. These pieces are uplifting,

which is unusual for me to say because I'm a fairly cynical person."

So the Corwins asked if they could commission Nathanson to do an additional painting — a practice on the rise among industry collectors, says Veronica Fernandez of Fine Art Advising Services, who recently has coordinated a commission for Mandeville Films founder David Hoberman (a sculpture by L.A. artist Amanda Ross-Ho) and is in the process of commissioning a wall drawing by Chicago-based artist Tony Lewis for an exec at a major studio.

Still, commissions are not commonplace, nor are they always a simple solution to supply scarcity. "You can give artists some parameters, but

you cannot tell them exactly what to do," says Lisa Schiff of Schiff Fine Art. "A lot of discussions about commissions stop because of collectors' fears that they won't get what they wanted." Artists may balk at creating a piece to, say, match a sofa, says Joshua Roth, head of UTA's artist division (he has commissioned works by Jim Shaw and Alex Israel): "A truly great artist isn't a gun for hire." Esther Kim Varet, the gallerist behind Various Small Fires, often doesn't forward commission requests to artists. "No artist wants to feel like they are a mail-order catalog," she says.



Hoberman commissioned Ross-Ho for this sculpture.

For dealers, a commission can mean extra work for not much extra money, as these pieces typically aren't priced significantly higher than already completed

ones. There are contracts involved, some complicated (one provided to *THR* runs 12 pages). Having a previous relationship can help. "If the artist likes you (or your adviser) and respects the collection you've assembled, they'll probably say yes or, at the very least, think about it," says Fernandez. "More established artists can sometimes take years to say yes."

Three years ago, producer Sue Naegle, former entertainment president of HBO, commissioned three paintings by artist Max Jansons. The idea came from her architects, Susan Lanier and Paul Lubowicki, who were converting a barn on the property at Naegle's second home in Ojai, Calif.; they suggested gracing three interior sliding doors with original art. "One of my ideas was to have three different artists,"



Corwin

recalls her art adviser Nancy Chaikin. Naegle instead suggested one — Jansons (who happens to be married to Chaikin). "During the process, I really wanted her to come and see if she was getting what she wanted," recalls Chaikin. "She said no. I think it's indicative of what she does in her work. She has to have faith in writers and directors and believe in people."

Hoberman sought the Ross-Ho piece after a decade of collecting the artist's work. The more-than-6-foot-tall sculpture of a torso with a cascade of women's underwear in black, white and gray — part of a show last summer at downtown L.A. gallery Francois Ghebaly — had sold before Hoberman (who saw an emailed image) fell in love with it. Fernandez spoke to the gallery, he recalls, "and Amanda [Ross-Ho] came back and said, yes, she's interested in making the sculpture with the underwear in a rainbow of colors, which I thought was great because I love color." An uncommon agreement was reached: Hoberman paid the costs of fabricating the work. If he decided not to buy it, Ross-Ho's gallery could sell it, and if it sold, Hoberman would get reimbursed — but in the end, the pact was moot. "Partly because of that piece I ended up turning my garage into a gallery," says Hoberman. "It's so striking, yet it has a lot of humor to it."

As for the Corwins, they will be getting their Nathanson — thanks to dogged effort on the part of Bruce (whose clients also include writer-producer Lee Eisenberg). "Sarah Jane asked me not only once but four times," recalls Various Small Fires' Varet. Nathanson appreciates that the Corwins "are going to put it up somewhere and will live with it," he says. "A lot of times when people buy, it's to store pieces or flip them."

The Corwins will hang the piece in their Venice home ("We have one wall left," says Charlie); they put few strictures on the commission other than to say they wanted a painting in keeping with the exhibit they admired and to specify an approximate size. "I'm not the type of person that wants to customize too much," says Charlie. "Like if I go into a really fancy restaurant and order something and they ask me how I'd like it done, I usually say whatever the chef prefers. That's usually going to be the best." **THR**



L.A.'s Most Expensive Masters

2015 auction hauls for SoCal's top 5 earners, from the Artnet database

▲ ED RUSCHA, 78

Total 2015 auction sales | **\$39.73M**

Top piece | "OK"

(\$5.4M, Sotheby's New York, May 12)

Hollywood collectors | **Jay Z, Leonardo DiCaprio, Beth Swofford, Brian Grazer**



MARK BRADFORD, 54

Total 2015 auction sales | **\$21.89M**

Top piece | "Constitution IV"

(\$5.8M, Phillips London, Oct. 14 — a record sale for the artist)

Hollywood collector | **Ari Emanuel**



DAVID HOCKNEY, 78

Total 2015 auction sales | **\$18.39M**

Top piece | "Arranged Felled Trees"

(\$5.3M, Sotheby's London, July 1)

Hollywood collectors | **Steve Martin, Steve Tisch, Elton John**



MARK GROTJAHN, 47

Total 2015 auction sales | **\$17.72M**

Top piece | "Untitled (Into and Behind the Green Eyes of the Tiger Monkey Face 43.18)"

(\$6.5M, Sotheby's New York, May 12)

Hollywood collectors | **Darren Star, Ellen DeGeneres, Michael Ovitz, DiCaprio**



STERLING RUBY, 43

Total 2015 auction sales | **\$6.8M**

Top piece | "SP22"

(\$869K, Christie's New York, May 12)

Hollywood collectors | **Ovitz, UTA's Joshua Roth**



The Financial Windfall Collectors Get Through Lending Art

Parking private works at museums boosts value and often gives tax breaks as Eli Broad and Peter Brant get a skeptical eye from the Senate BY **STACY PERMAN**

THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION CAME UNDER FIRE LAST summer when, in the midst of rape allegations against Bill Cosby, its National Museum of African Art mounted an exhibition of artwork from the comedian and wife Camille's collection. Refusing to cancel the show, the museum instead posted a statement that read in part that charges against Cosby "cast a negative light on what should be a joyful exploration of African and African American art in this gallery." However, this "negative light" also illuminated some questionable behind-the-scenes

dynamics involved when a museum borrows art from collectors. Camille Cosby, a member of the museum's advisory board, was instrumental in launching the show; the couple, friends of NMAA's director Johnnetta Cole, also gave (a tax-deductible) \$716,000 to cover the majority of its costs. These entanglements, which came to light in the midst of the furor, violated widely held standards in the museum world. Given that a museum's seal of approval can boost a work's value, most steer clear of exhibiting art from collectors unless it has been given or left to the institution, precisely to avoid even the appearance of any conflict of interest or self-dealing.

"With art treated as an asset and with incredible attention paid to high-value marquee assets," says Maxwell Anderson, former director of the Whitney and Dallas Museum of Art and currently executive director at the New Cities Foundation, museums are becoming "more of a negotiated space and less for the public good." Take

the Portland Art Museum, which has become a staging ground for important works because its state, Oregon, is one of five without use and sales tax. For more than three months ending in early 2014, Portlandians got to admire Francis Bacon's "Three Studies of Lucian Freud" fresh off of its \$142 million sale at Christie's New York. By first shipping the work to Portland instead of her Las Vegas home, hotel mogul Elaine Wynn may have been entitled to duck some \$11 million in Nevada taxes. Questionable but legal, says Tom Eccles, executive director of the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College: "It's not a problem of the collector; it's a question for the government."

The single-collector museum also is raising tax ethics questions as more such institutions open their doors. Eli Broad opened his \$140 million museum in L.A. in September. In London artist Damien Hirst unveiled a free admission gallery in October to house his 3,000-plus works. In a stone barn on the property of *Interview* publisher



"Three Studies of Lucian Freud" was installed at the Portland Art Museum in December 2013.

Peter Brant's Connecticut estate stands The Brant Foundation Art Study Center. Guess founders Paul and Maurice Marciano are planning to turn the Masonic Temple on Wilshire Boulevard into a private museum to house their collection. Such founders are entitled to deduct the value of their collection and the cost of insuring and warehousing it — but in November, the Senate Finance Committee decided to take a closer look at 11 private museums, including the Broad and the Brant. The committee, led by Utah Sen. Orrin Hatch, sent letters asking whether "some private foundations are operating museums that offer minimal benefit to the public while enabling donors to reap substantial tax advantages." But with art prices in the stratosphere, the dance between private collectors and museums must go on. "Look at the flight of capital to the art market," says Anderson. "Compare it to the budgets of museums; it's laughable. Today, LACMA's budget is less than one painting."