

Young art dealers now showing New generation leads surge in commercial galleries

"I'm young enough, I can do this and do it 110 percent," says Colin Rhys, who is turning a profit at his Rhys Gallery. (JODI HILTON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE)

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent | July 10, 2007

Colin Rhys has been dealing art since he was 18, when he opened a gallery in his Roxbury condo in 2004, as a sophomore in college. For the first show, Rhys recalls, 15 people showed up at the opening.

Today Rhys owns Rhys Gallery, a spacious white cube at Harrison Avenue and East Berkeley Street that he opened last fall. He is the youngest of several new dealers on Boston's commercial gallery scene in their 20s or early 30s.

The surge in young dealers echoes a national trend, supported by a white-hot market for contemporary art in which prices are soaring, youth often equals cachet, and international art fairs and the Internet are turning what has largely been a storefront business into a global one. In such a wide-open market, more savvy young people are opening commercial galleries.

"We're seeing a generation of younger people devoting their energies to commercial gallery work, rather than opening co-ops or alternative spaces," says Nick Capasso, curator at the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park. "In the 1980s, [Boston area] young people opened cooperative [galleries] like Kingston, Bromfield, and Mobius. That shifted in the next generation to alternative spaces, like Oni Gallery, the Artists Foundation, and Berwick. Now they're jumping right into the commercial world."

In Boston, young owners of commercial galleries include Rhys; Emily Isenberg, 28, who just opened LaMontagne Gallery on Melcher Street with older partner Russell LaMontagne; Abigail Ross, 31, who has taken over the Judi Rotenberg Gallery, which she now co-owns with Rotenberg, her mother; and Camilo Alvarez, 31, who opened Samson Projects three years ago.

This isn't the first time young dealers have opened commercial galleries, but this time the market appears to be supporting them -- and the kind of emerging artists many of them present.

The New Art Dealers Alliance, an international group fostering emerging artists and their dealers, started in New York in 2002 when several dealers in their 20s got together over drinks. A year later, NADA was staging its own satellite art fair during the giant Art Basel Miami Beach show. Now it has 80 members in the United States, Europe, and Asia.

There was a similar movement of young dealers in the East Village in 1989-90, says NADA cofounder Sheri L. Pasquarella. "But emerging art was not as commerce-driven as it is today," Pasquarella says. "It's hard to maintain spaces selling things for \$500 to \$1,000. Now there's a zeitgeist among younger dealers that says this can be a discernible market."

Indeed. At Rhys Gallery, prices typically range from \$2,000 to \$30,000, and "Fusiform," the exhibit up now, features a huge installation of a whale made by a Chicago art collective out of scraps of found wood and other detritus, priced at \$65,000. After just a few years, Rhys says, he is making a profit.

At Samson Projects, prices are \$200 to \$80,000, and Alvarez also dabbles in the resale market, which can pull in more than \$1 million per work. At Rotenberg Gallery, prices range from \$1,000 to more than \$40,000. Ross has been at it for six years, and they have not all been profitable, but this has been a good one. "There are periods when it's about fortitude, and now, a time of success," she says.

Notes Capasso, "It's great to have a younger generation come along and start filling the gallery world. They're willing to take a lot more risks. They're young and idealistic. They don't have a stable of 18 artists to whom they have to respond. They can show things the more established galleries can't or won't."

To cover rent, advertising, travel, and other expenses, many of the young dealers have made sacrifices. "Not everybody can open up a gallery at 28," says Isenberg, who is paying off her share of LaMontagne Gallery in sweat equity. Her partner, who was one of the founders, along with Zach Feuer and Nick Lawrence, of the former LFL Gallery in New York, runs a consulting business.

Rhys took a loan out against his condo to rent and renovate his Harrison Avenue space, and he enlisted investors to underwrite the gallery. "I'm young enough, I can do this and do it 110 percent," he says. "I don't have to worry about a wife and kids. I just have to worry about the debt if I shut down," he says.

Rhys sees his gallery as "a launching pad" for artists. His June show, for example, featured a chandelier-like installation of masking tape and paintings by the 22-year-old Mark Chariker ; one sold for \$9,000.

One goal of that show was to promote Chariker's work to New York dealer Leo Koenig , says Rhys, who paired Chariker's work with pieces by an artist Koenig represents. "It's all strategic," Rhys says.

Business strategy is important for Rhys, who double-majored at Tufts University and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in fine art and entrepreneurship. He has hired a publicist -- a rare move for a Boston gallery owner -- to help get the gallery in the public eye in new ways, such as hosting a dinner party for Boston Common magazine.

"The art world is a niche market," Rhys says. "You have to reach beyond that."

Rhys's current show, "Fusiform," also has two named sponsors: Alt Terrain, a marketing firm, and real estate developers Goldman Properties . Getting underwriters is not new, but naming them in big letters right beneath the show's title on the wall is unusual. Rhys says he split the \$10,000 cost of mounting the show with his sponsors.

Rhys's ambition shows in his desire to court major collectors; during a recent trip to Los Angeles, he tagged along with a friend who'd been invited to dine at the home of billionaire Eli Broad and his wife, Edythe.

Many of the young gallery owners look to Alvarez, and his tactics of working global art fairs and the Internet, as a model. Like Alvarez, Rhys travels regularly to art fairs, which in the last five years have changed the face of art commerce.

"It's the mallification of the art world," says Alvarez. "It widens the market. There's something for everyone."

Alvarez estimates that of his sales, 15 to 20 percent are in the Boston market, 40 to 50 percent are national, and the rest are international. "I have collectors I have never even met," he says. "I send jpegs to Japan. I talk to them on the phone and they purchase over the Internet without even seeing the work."

All the gallerists also speak of their commitment to Boston and Boston artists, although some say they are frustrated with the fact that art collecting has traditionally been conservative here, with local collectors bypassing Boston galleries to buy in New York or elsewhere.

Isenberg worked the Miami fair with Allston Skirt Gallery one year. "I met Bostonians who didn't know there were galleries on Harrison Avenue," she says.

But for Alvarez, who sits on Boston-area advisory boards and curates locally, the opening of the new Institute of Contemporary Art is evidence of local change. "The ICA is starting to collect," he says. "That's a temperature gauge of what's going on in the market."

Isenberg thinks the buzz on Boston's art scene may be building. "I'm excited about where it could go," she says.

Rhys is, too. "Who wants to go to New York? Yuck," he exclaims. "Three hundred galleries in 10 blocks, and it grows every day. Here, you can lead a movement and be a part of the change. There, the change has happened." ■

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