

Adaptation of the artistic

In lean times, galleries are exploring new avenues to part art lovers from their cash

BY KATYA KAZAKINA
BLOOMBERG



Barnaby Furnas' *Boogie Man*, left, and Andy Warhol's *Committee 2000*, right, which are both being shown at Rental, a downscale New York gallery.



PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG

Two square canvases by Japanese artist Takashi Murakami flash Louis Vuitton logos, cutesy pink and yellow graphics and the price of US\$350,000.

Ubiquitous in the auction salesroom, Murakami's work now greets the visitors at Rental, a Lower East Side gallery overlooking the Manhattan Bridge and US\$20 buses to Philadelphia and Washington.

The downscale venue, known for showing emerging art, has installed 20 upscale works by fashionable and commercially tested names for its summer group exhibition. Don't Panic! I'm Selling My Collection assembles pieces from four anonymous private collections, with price tags prominent.

"It's a sign of the times," said owner Joel Mesler, 35. "There's been a huge paradigm shift in the art market. People who know how to adapt and are not rigidly operating the same way they have been for the past five years are going to prevail."

Don't Panic! is an attempt to attract new clients during the lean times, said Mesler, a mellow and soft-spoken West Coast transplant. He closed his Los Angeles-based Mesler & Hug gallery last month to focus on Rental, where he often partners with

like-minded out-of-town galleries.

"On Sept. 15 our phone stopped ringing," said director Philip Deely, 25, remembering the day when Lehman Brothers declared bankruptcy last year. "It lasted into early spring. But people are not panicking any more. There's renewed hope that wasn't there six months ago."

Don't Panic! encapsulates many sectors of the art bubble: Blue-chip artists such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein; speculators' darlings Richard Prince and Murakami; young overnight sensations Barnaby Furnas and Hope Atherton; veterans John Wesley and Marilyn Minter; Chinese artists Huang Yan (黄岩) and Zhang Dali (張大力).

While there are no masterpieces here, several works are appealing and priced to sell. A striking black-and-white image of a bound woman by Japan's Nobuyoshi Araki would set you back US\$13,000. David Salle's sensual etching with an Asian motif is US\$1,500.

At US\$350,000, Murakami's 2005 diptych *Eye Love Superflat* seems overpriced. An identical work, with an estimate range of US\$350,000 to US\$450,000, failed to sell in November last year at Sotheby's in New York, according to Artnet.com, a database that

tracks auction results.

The show's curator, Claire Distenfeld, who is 23 and the gallery's latest hire, put it together in three weeks by drawing on her art-world connections.

A native New Yorker whose family lives at a pricey East 79th Street and Madison Avenue address, Distenfeld graduated from New York University, interned at the New Museum of Art and is getting a master's degree at Sotheby's Institute of Art. Her father owns a luxury-leather-goods company in Manhattan.

Her uncle is real-estate developer Richard Born, a collector of contemporary Chinese art whose BD Hotels owns or operates Manhattan boutique hotels such as the Mercer, Chambers and Maritime and is behind the Richard Meier towers in Greenwich Village.

"I knew where to go, and I hit the ground running," Distenfeld said.

She drew up a list of 15 collectors and succeeded in convincing four of them to consign works to the young gallery. The most expensive artwork Rental has sold up to now was a US\$35,000 painting by Henry Taylor, Mesler said.

"Claire went to individual collectors and said, 'Don't you want to sell something?'" said

Cynthia Nachmani, Distenfeld's mentor who teaches art and gives gallery tours in New York. "She is recycling art at the time when people need to sell."

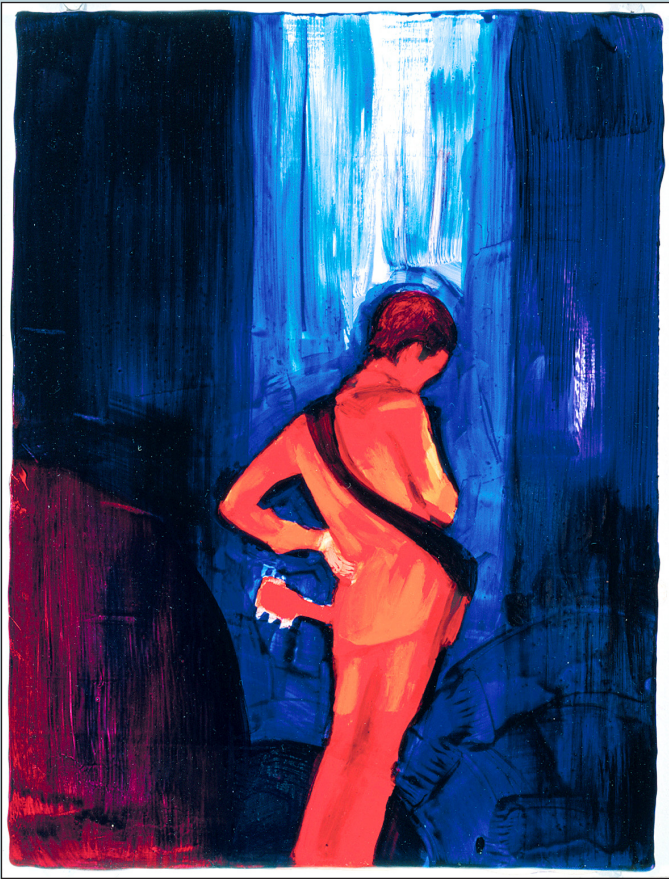
You can pick up a small "joke" painting by Prince for US\$110,000, a Warhol silkscreen of martini glasses for US\$165,000 and an oval canvas by Elizabeth Peyton for US\$50,000.

One of the show's highlights, a painting by George Condo, was too big to fit in the elevator or make it up the narrow stairway lined with Chinese signs, a bridal-gown shop and a dental office. It's still for sale at US\$85,000.

At the opening, some potential clients — middle-age men in suits and women flashing big diamonds — sipped white wine next to hipsters whose blue eyebrows matched their clothes. A security guard, the gallery's first, looked on sternly.

The older guests were Distenfeld's friends and family members, many of whom have never been in the neighborhood before.

"This is the first for most of us," said Nachmani. "When I lecture to my groups, we go to Chelsea or 57th Street. I've never taken them to galleries in this part of town. And now I would."



Roseland, left, and Craig, above, by Elizabeth Peyton.

PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG

Acts of devotion

Elizabeth Peyton's portraits are certainly fashionable, but is she quite as devoted to painting as she is to her favorite celebrities?

BY LAURA CUMMING
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Elizabeth Peyton — painter of celebrities, celebrity painter. Is there much more to be said? Now in her mid-40s, this native New Yorker has acquired such a reputation for her wan little portraits of pop stars, art stars, dealers and collectors that her society status appears almost indivisible from theirs.

In a sense, Peyton is the painterly equivalent of photographers like Wolfgang Tillmans and Juergen Teller, so completely a part of the very world they record for magazines as well as art museums. And in fact she also takes, and exhibits, photos of her friends; Marc Jacobs, Chloe Sevigny, Matthew Barney, Olafur Eliasson, faces skimmed from social occasions. The curator of a recent show called these somewhat insouciant (and often poorly exposed) shots "acts of devotion," which is striking precisely because this is the exact claim people always make for her paintings.

But the question raised by the paintings, as opposed to the photographs, is how can one possibly tell?

Peyton's portraits sound like a fan's visions, sure enough. Liam and Noel Gallagher imagined in their Sunday best on their mum's sofa; Liam in violet-blue shadow; Liam in flowers; Jarvis delicately offering Liam a light. Kurt Cobain in white, as a child, with his favorite cat, as a blanched and beautiful face — not too far from reality.

All these paintings are based on spreads from *NME*, *Rolling Stone* and so forth. The translation into oil paint involves flattening, cropping and a kind of whimsical simplification, not so radical that the star is no longer recognizable, nor so streamlined you could really call it stylish. The main effect is simply of homogeneity. All these famous figures — no matter how individual, how young or old, solitary, tormented, cheerful or gregarious, no matter what profession or sex — share a family resemblance. They all look like Elizabeth Peytons.

Which means weightless, elfin, sharp-nosed, heads slightly too big for skimpy bodies, women as waifs, men as lost boys. It is the same only more so in Peyton's gamine self-portraits. Thin as paint, the paint itself washy and dilute, her figures look too weak to peel a grape. And the pictures they appear in are so small, not much bigger than a magazine shot, as to imply a certain candid intimacy.

But if someone told you Peyton's cute little picture of Sid Vicious and his dear old mum was actually ironic, you could so easily believe it. Or her pictures of Queen Elizabeth II as a winsome teenager: mightn't these be deliberately kitsch? Does she really and indiscriminately revere Mad King Ludwig of Bavaria, Prince Harry and Oscar Wilde's treacherous lover Bosie?

These three appear in paintings but also in

drawings — Peyton's great forte — with more than a hint of Max Beerbohm in their elegant and witty concision. And not just Beerbohm, but Ingres, Holbein and David Hockney; so perhaps it is here that one finds the true act of devotion, not to mention humor.

The paintings, on the other hand, are weedy, with their drips and mimsy swipes. The palette runs from chalk-white to vampirical scarlet and purple. Sometimes the paint is laid on in thin brown smears reminiscent of nothing so much as dirty protests, sometimes in a paste that lies on the board like tile grout. Reproductions don't convey these nasty sensations.

Why any self-respecting painter would set out to be quite so feeble has never been obvious, but so many have done so in the last three decades that safety in numbers has long since set in. Feebleness is not so much a coincidence by now as a movement, the success of each artist reinforcing the next. Peyton was among the first, at the forefront of all those American women like Karen Kilimnik and Lisa Yuskavage who have created such a strong market out of deliberate weakness. She is by far the best, or at least the most interesting.

The exhibition of Peyton's work at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, beautifully installed in galleries the height of a church, the tiny paintings set far apart to emphasize

the supposed analogy with icons, includes a couple of really fine works. One is a spy portrait of David Hockney in which the trademark glasses are swimming-pool deep. The other is a version of Delacroix's formidably hieratic self-portrait in the Louvre, all high collar and prim moustache, which Peyton crops into a sepia close-up thus removing the French painter's remoteness and edging him closer to photo-real presence.

It is conceptually clever, but more than that it exudes actual feeling; as if this modern painter in cool, hip, Manhattan had some real empathy with the solitary and secretive genius of 19th-century romanticism and had found a way to unlock him.

Still, this is not a very high yield from a 20-year survey. And there are plenty of works here that do not rise to anything as big as an idea, paintings that try out other artists' styles as if they were fashion accessories. Some are as twee as anything by the girly Karen Kilimnik; others like outright pastiches of the Belgian painter Luc Tuymans.

And in the end, the overall tone is so hard to read that one even begins to doubt the sincerity of her aim. Peyton has often said she cannot paint anyone she does not admire, but the only consistent visual proof of this admiration is the constancy of her attention. It is one thing to be devoted to people, another to be preoccupied by painting.

Celebrity Interview



Killer

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Following his father's conversion, the family moved from Las Vegas to Nephi, a tiny, Mormon-founded town in Utah. Improbably, it was in Nephi that Flowers discovered music, via his older brother, who gave him his Cure and Smiths cassettes as he replaced them with CDs. There was "never" any sense of youthful rebellion about his love of music — "I didn't wear black and not talk to other kids or anything" — nor did it feel like something he wanted to do himself. "I never thought it was an option." Instead, he harbored ambitions of being a professional golfer.

He returned to Vegas at 16 to live with an aunt and at 17 left school, taking a succession of jobs — cleaning golf carts, waiting tables, working as a hotel bellhop — while making tentative forays into putting together a band. It sounds like a rather bleak period — the menial work, the failure of the world to be set alight by his early synthesizer combo Blush Response — but it was anything but. "The great thing about Vegas is the tips," he says, suddenly animated. "You wake up, you go out to your job and you hustle. You've always got this wad in your pocket, you know it's there, you want to count it all day. It's exciting. I loved it."

Still, the music wasn't going well: Blush Response had broken up, and Flowers found himself in a band with people he delicately describes as "a little more experimental than me." "This guy sold speed and he was a hooker. He had a son and we would watch his son while he went with women." He frowns. "I can't imagine what the mother was like that didn't have custody of the kid."

Perhaps understandably, their association was short-lived. Next, Flowers answered an advert Dave Keuning had placed, which mentioned Oasis. They took the name The Killers from a New Order video and together wrote *Mr Brightside*, which went on to be their first hit. Keen to stand out, Flowers took to wearing make-up on stage and bedecking his keyboard with rhinestones. "The other bands in Las Vegas hated it, they hated us," he says with what sounds like a note of relish. "They still do. We don't get much love in Las Vegas. But their girlfriends like us."

Fittingly, given Flowers' Anglophilia, they were spotted by a British record label before the US expressed interest. They flew to England — Flowers had never before had a passport — to seemingly instantaneous success: *Mr Brightside* went into the top 10 and stayed in the charts for 65 weeks. But no sooner had success arrived than dissenting voices were claiming that The Killers' orthodoxically perfect take on alt-rock seemed oddly stilted and contrived. "If you look at us and you hear it, it's almost too good to be true," he says flatly, and he has a point: a ready-made pin-up singing songs that sound impossibly commercial. "We have good songs, it sounds perfect, it sounds contrived, but it wasn't."

But there was also a sense that people simply thought Flowers was perhaps a little too gimlet-eyed, a little too driven in the pursuit of success for his own good. There was also his refusal to add his voice to the clamor of musical protest surrounding the Iraq war and the Bush presidency. "The height of it all was when you went to a concert and you knew someone was going to say something about George Bush and everybody would be so happy. It's an easy way to get a cheer. That really irked me." An interviewer recently got Flowers to admit he supported US President Barack Obama, which makes the Bush stuff a little puzzling — it made people think he was a raving neocon. A nervous giggle: "Yeah, that's how they spun it." Wasn't that annoying? "A bit." A long pause. "I don't know enough about politics to talk about it."

And finally there was The Killers' sudden physical transformation, around the release of *Sam's Town* — make-up and rhinestones abandoned in favor of looking like extras from *Deadwood* — which was interpreted in some quarters as a cynical attempt to get middle America to like them. Flowers says not — "That was never thought out" — and in any case, if it was, it didn't work: in the US, *Sam's Town* did noticeably worse than their debut. Worse, *Day & Age* failed to make up the lost ground, which clearly rankles. "How much does it bother me?" he says. "I think about it every day. I've thought about it today. I've already talked about it today with my press officer."

Indeed, he still seems to be thinking about it after their performance at the Belgian festival, which by anyone's standards is a triumph: the crowd sing along, scream, hold up signs bearing messages of undying devotion to Flowers. But Flowers picks apart his performance: a wrong note here, a missed cue there. He hates playing in sunlight, he says. He worries that US audiences won't be able to work out how huge The Killers are in Britain because they've chosen to record their live DVD at London's Albert Hall rather than a vast stadium.

We repair to the side of the stage to watch Coldplay's headlining set. Chris Martin goes into overdrive, asking the crowd if they enjoyed The Killers — they did — saying how hard it is to follow such a great band on stage, and getting the audience to sing. "I got soul, but I'm not a soldier," the deathless refrain from *All These Things That I've Done*, the Killers track that Conservative Party leader David Cameron elected to be shipwrecked with.

I look over at Flowers and notice something extraordinary: nothing. He doesn't react at all: not a smile, not an aw-shucks shrug. He just looks straight on, impassive to the sound of the biggest band in the world praising him to the skies and thousands of people singing his words. After all, he can't help it if he's businesslike.