

SEANKELLY

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On Valuing Art and Not its Value: An Interview with Sean Kelly



Sean Kelly at The Armory Show 2019 March 7– 10, 2019, Pier 94, Booth 501 Photography: Sebastiano Pellion di Persano Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York

For the occasion of the 25th Anniversary of Armory Show, we interviewed Sean Kelly, both our 2019 editorial committee member and the English man in the New York art world, par excellence. We took him aside at the preview of the fair to discuss living in New York, what it means to be a collector today and his “Collect Wisely” campaign.

Lara Morrell: Having just landed in New York and as a fellow Brit, may I ask you what originally brought you here?

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Sean Kelly: I moved here 30 years ago this year, I used to be a museum curator and director and I was really interested in giving the commercial sector a go, so I moved here for a job but that didn't work so I stayed on and opened by own gallery. I love being here in New York, I really do.

LM: Would you ever consider moving back to London?

SK: No, I know London has changed a lot, but I think there is a great deal to be said for being outside your own culture, I am an insider but remain an outsider at the same time, which provides a unique opportunity and perspective. When I first moved here someone (who was English) said to me 'something will happen to you within 3 years of you being here and it will determine whether you stay or not', if you stay you'll be here forever and you'll become a New Yorker and if you don't you'll go back and it won't work. That was exactly what happened almost exactly after three years and I had figured out by then that I was determined to stay. You can't just wander into to New York, you've got to be really determined to be here and almost everybody I knew who came went back within three years. I do think there is a funny energy to it.

LM: Could you tell me about Collect Wisely?

SK: Collect wisely came out of a general dissatisfaction around the fact that the only conversations that anybody seemed to be having in the art world seemed to be about value and finical remuneration. This is fine, its part of what we do, but I didn't want it to be the only thing I thought about or did and I don't think collects do either and frankly there were a lot of people getting quite distressed and turned off by it. So collect wisely was an idea that we cooked up as a positive way to respond to that weight and moving the conversation back to ideas of collecting and around value, but not just financial value, so we are essentially talking to collectors who are extremely passionate about why they collect. Its been an incredibly fun and emotionally restorative thing to do, with a huge amount of positive response.

LM: What is involved?

SK: It literally just involves the identification of a number of collectors to talk to, we sit down and talk to them, we don't talk to them about the gallery, that was the precept from the beginning, I did not want to talk to them about what we did, I wasn't trying to promote the gallery. I wanted to talk to them about why they are passionate about collecting. So far we've done 13 public episodes and we've got another 8 or ten in the can, we're going to do at least one hundred, there is also an exhibition and book in the works.

LM: What is the nature of collecting in the 21st century? How does a collector make a meaningful investment?

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SK: Collecting in the 21st Century is I think pretty much the same as what it has always been, yet as we sit here in the middle of an art fair, there is a much larger gene pool of collectors so its a far more valent activity than ever before, just like museum visiting. There are a lot more people going to museums and that's a wonderful thing as well as the number of artists being supported, likewise wonderful. I think that the essentials of collecting remain the same, human nature is pretty consistent and I think it very much about what you care about, what you love and what you passionate about.

With people spending the kind of money they are spending on art there are always going to considerations about whether or not it is being spent wisely, whether they are protecting their investment, so to say, but I don't think anybody should think about art as an investment category, they should simply think about it as something they love and something they are passionate about. Across the life span of a collection, certain things will become very valuable, certain things will go up, things won't, things will be fashionable or unfashionable in probably several different phases of ones collecting career and that's natural and how it should be. I defy anybody that can tell me who the most successful artists of 19th century Victorian artist was ,because it was an illustrator, not somebody we would know now, but they were the most wealthy artists of their time, I think history takes care of those issues for us and you should just buy what you love.

LM: How does one learn to educate their eye and get inside an artists sensibility?

SK: You have educate your own eye, you have to spend a lot of time looking and doing your homework. If you listen to collect wisely, you'll hear every collector saying repeatedly that you have to do you homework, you have to get out there, you have to read, you have to pay attention and you have to come to your own opinion about things, if you listen you won't learn very much and you'll end up making a lot of mistakes, you've got to look! There is no shortcut, there is no better form of education than spending time educating your eye.

LM: With the ever increasing number of art fairs worldwide, what is your criteria for art fairs to take part in?

SK: There is an art fair somewhere in the world every week, if not almost every day and I think that one has to make very careful decisions which to target in terms of financial gain, but also geopolitically, if you are going to pay attention to a region then you have to pay attention to that market and I think you also have to honour and be responsible to it, for instance we do a lot in Latin America, so we do a fair in Latin America, we do a lot in Asia so we do a fair in Asia and so forth. I think it really is in response to the opportunities that present themselves in the region and what collectors you are working with.

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LM: We are based in Venice, with the upcoming 58th Venice Biennale are you representing any artists taking part?

SK: We've got a number of artists taking part, we've got Marina Abramović and Julião Sarmiento in a three person show with Carsten Höller, Julian Charrière is doing something there, Alejandro Campins is doing the Cuban Pavilion and I know a number of the other artists are doing different events. It's opening early again this year, so it splits the market a little, because a lot of people will go either before or after Basel. I myself won't get there until after Basel, but I honestly don't mind that, I don't go for the parties I go for the art, In fact I prefer being in Venice either before or after when its all about the art and its quieter.

LM: What do you think of the title it carries this year, 'May you Live in Interesting Times'?

SK: Well we do, don't we?! So I think its quite an appropriate title, in fact I cannot remember in my lifetime a more challenging, demanding and complex time. Whether it is the idiocy of Donald Trump or the patheticness of the Republican Party and whats occurring to America or the absurdity of Brexit, or many of the other political challenges that many countries are facing, France being held ransom by the Yellow Jackets. There are challenges left, right and centre, there are challenges in Asia, Brazil and Venezuela.

We live in very challenging times, it feels like a world over geopolitical meltdown and the art world is a burgeoning environment, so I do think it is a very apt title and I hope the exhibition reflects that, because if it will, it will do its job.