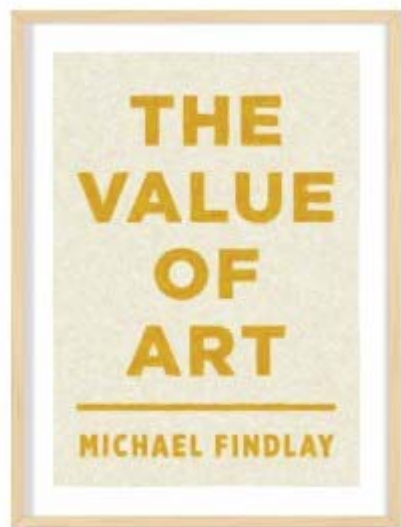


books

Michael Findlay's 'Value of Art' Tells Tales, Just Wants People to Like Art

By Dan Duray 9:10am



Midway through his new book *The Value of Art* (Prestel USA, 208 pp, \$29.95), art dealer and longtime Acquavella Galleries director Michael Findlay proposes a thought exercise involving a mystical creature he calls the “art genie.” The art genie approaches you one day and tells you that he will give you any work from the grand library of art history, to own, under two conditions— you may not sell the art, and you may not show it to anyone else or receive any other kind of social benefit from owning it. What artwork would you choose?

Over lunch at The Mark, Mr. Findlay, in a sharp suit, scratched a stubbly chin like he'd actually never considered his own answer.

“The Rothko chapel, of course!” he said at last, with a grin, referring to the interfaith chapel Mark Rothko made for the de Menil family in 1971. Then he straightened and went relatively smaller scale. “Or maybe one of Joseph Beuys’s rooms,” installation artworks that, he said, have been in his head since he first discovered them at Documenta in 1968. “I probably wasn’t paying attention or in those days the signage wasn’t good and I walked into this space and I was profoundly moved. I thought, ‘Well, maybe this is some installation that has yet to be put together.’ I didn’t know what it was! I didn’t know who did it. I didn’t know if it was done by one person. I didn’t know if it was art. I knew nothing about it, but I was absolutely riveted.”

It’s the kind of immediate, firsthand interaction, devoid of hype or dollar value, that’s become rarer in art, but it’s the kind he’d like to promote with his book.

And what better time for such a reality check? This week marks the beginning of the big spring auctions, one half of the biannual eye bulge foisted upon us by the three major auction houses. As each night hammers in a three-figure million sum, you can’t help but ponder the why of it. Plenty of people over the years have said that art’s astronomical value is meaningless—Damien Hirst has even made a career of saying so—but the point has never before been made from a corner as unexpected as Michael Findlay’s.

Mr. Findlay used to head the Impressionist and Modern department at Christie’s, and his current employer, Acquavella, is housed in an imposing marble townhouse across from the mayor’s residence on 79th Street. They’re known for museum-quality shows by the likes of Lucien Freud and Pablo Picasso, not

exactly 99% stuff. “Someone said to me it was a little like if John Wayne Gacy wrote a book about how awful homicide is,” a journalist quipped of *The Value of Art* at one of the auction previews.

But let’s be clear: Mr. Findlay’s book is not a polemic, neither does it in any way constitute his biting the hand that feeds him. Dollar value is firmly established as an element of the triumvirate that comprises art’s value, which the book says lies on its financial, aesthetic and social elements. The best collectors like the art for itself, though. If the market affirms their tastes, or if they’re invited to better parties because they buy art, he writes, so much the better, but the other elements are really just window dressing. It’s no secret that the art market trends ever upward, a growth Mr. Findlay puts at about 12 percent per year, so the threat that the financial value might overshadow the other two elements is very real, and it affects us nonbillionaires as well: Put two paintings side by side and try telling someone that the more expensive one is worse. As someone who deals with this sort of thing every day, it’s actually natural that Mr. Findlay felt the urge to write his book.

“I think it came out of the fact that there seemed to me a growing divide between people within the art world—what they talked about and the way they thought among themselves—and the reasonably well-educated general public,” he said. “The reasonably well-educated general public was more and more seeing the art world through a prism of financial terminology, and this ended up with people getting their information about works of art in economic language. I wanted to try to address it—and *redress* it, to some extent. I thought, who better to do that than one of the criminals?”

His experience comes in handy. Don’t believe it’s possible to buy a major Picasso out of sheer enjoyment? Come with the author to the Viande coffee shop in 1967, as a client anxiously waits for a phone call from London—she’s bid on a Blue Period painting, through a surrogate, with a half-million-dollar inheritance; it will be the only art she’ll ever buy and she’ll tell her neighbors in Montana that it’s fake. She just likes it. Want to know just how crass collectors can be? Join him as he learns, via a phone call from Pop artist Robert Indiana, that Andy Warhol has just been shot; Mr. Findlay is standing in his office with taxi fleet owner Robert Scull, “the pop of Pop Art” and “the Medici of the Minimalists,” who shrugs and says Andy shouldn’t have been hanging out with that “drug crowd.” Art mutual funds he likens to pickaxe salesmen in gold rush boomtowns—he’s seen it, he knows. As in real life, he is wry and difficult to argue with.

Mr. Findlay entered an art world that was more low-key. He was drawn to the Americas from his native England in the ’60s, through his love of John Coltrane and a scholarship to York University in Toronto, which he abandoned after a year because he found the city “dark and miserable and Victorian.” On his way back home, in 1964, he stopped in New York for two weeks—and sold his ticket at the end of them. After failing to find a bookstore that would hire him, he got a job at Richard Feigen’s gallery on 81st Street simply by wandering in and asking for one. The dealer soon opened a Soho storage space-cum-gallery—technically the first Soho gallery, Mr. Feigen pointed out in an interview, since Paula Cooper was actually north of Houston—and had Mr. Findlay run it.

“I felt that that was the world he was comfortable in and very effective in,” Mr. Feigen said of Mr. Findlay, who lived above the downtown space and was allowed to do things like set the floor on fire for a John van Saun performance piece. “I never involved him very much uptown.”

If it was smaller, it was also more elite; there wasn't an equivalent to Bushwick where you might be able to just put on a show yourself. Los Angeles conceptual artist John Baldessari brought slides of his early text paintings from gallery to gallery in Manhattan and faced rejection at each one, until Mr. Findlay offered him a place in a group show, the artist's first New York show and his second gallery show ever.

"The problem for any dealer is to be the first person to take a chance on an artist," Mr. Baldessari said. "Most dealers wait for someone else to take a chance and then they poach from the other gallery. It's very difficult to go out on a limb for an untested artist and Michael did that for me. I'm very grateful."

During this period, Mr. Findlay published poetry in a journal called *Nadada*. He was also in talks to open a rock and roll nightclub, to be called At, in the space of the Stonewall Inn, that would have featured automat-like vending machines carrying a variety of essentials, like stockings. He and his partners backed out after they realized that the project wouldn't be possible without mob involvement.

In 1970, Mr. Findlay went on to open his own gallery, J.H. Duffy and Sons Ltd., on Spring Street, named for his grandfather because there were already too many galleries called Findlay. He eventually went on to Christie's in the 1980s, and then to Acquavella.

Mr. Baldessari remembers being impressed by the fact that Mr. Findlay owned a cellular phone in the '70s. During this period, the pop artist James Rosenquist, who now shows with Acquavella, said Mr. Findlay could always be relied upon to bring fashion models to parties at his house in East Hampton, even on a rainy Sunday afternoon. "That was a pretty rambunctious period," he added. In 1973, Mr. Findlay married Naomi Sims, who is often credited as being the first black supermodel. They divorced in 1991, and in 1999 Mr. Findlay married his current wife, Victoria, an artist. At Christie's he traveled the world with then-president Christopher Burge, who still acts as auctioneer at the house's major sales. Mr. Burge hired Mr. Findlay to replace him as Imp-Mod head.

"For some reason he was particularly successful in Japan," Mr. Burge said, adding that Japan was no small segment of the art market in the '80s. "The Japanese collectors absolutely loved Michael. I think it was something to do with his quietness. I think they felt that Westerners were a bit flash, but his gentle approach made him very popular over there."

"For me it's still a daily adjustment to come uptown to work," Mr. Findlay explained at The Mark. "A friend of mine who's known me for a long time told me the other day that every home I've had, I've tried to turn it into the space of my first gallery, that loft space on Spring Street. In a sense he was right." He now has a large loft in Hell's Kitchen. "My wife and daughter just go along with the fact that we don't have many rooms in it."

It's not as though the influx of cash in the art market is without its benefits for the art world. Anne Higonnet, who teaches a course on collecting at Columbia University, claims more money in the system means more money for artists, money that allows them to tackle more ambitious projects. She cited the popular painter Kehinde Wiley.

“The amount of money this man is able to command has enabled him to do things like this World Stage project,” Professor Higonnet said, “where he can have a team of assistants and he can go to Rio di Janerio, he can go to Israel, he can go to China—do things on a scale that is equivalent to the scale of Old Masters like Ruebens.”

And if there's more money floating around in the art market, artists are better paid at the top level, and at mid-range, and finally, at the starving artists level, which would mean, theoretically, that the starving might not be so hard—they might be able to afford the really top-shelf ramen.

Mr. Findlay doesn't buy this. The market may be useful in that government-funded art often leads to “warehouses of really awful stuff,” but emerging artists are rarely supported by more money in the system.

“The drive to support an emerging artist, who might be talented, working in a difficult challenging way, comes from the desire that we hope for *their* sake that they can somehow scratch a living out of this,” he said.

In other words, an increase of speculators doesn't mean a surplus of people who might fund the avant-garde.

Mr. Findlay's days in the field have left him with a fairly impressive collection himself—he owns Alan Jones, Gerald Laing, Rosenquist, Warhol (“like everyone. Well, not everyone”). In the book, he describes helping Billy Wilder sell his own collection, rife with works by Georges Braque, Juan Miró, Salvador Dali, at Christie's in 1989, while Wilder was still alive, rather than at an estate sale. He wanted to direct his own last scene. That scene doesn't seem near for the spry Mr. Findlay, but we asked if he might ever consider doing something similar with his own collection.

“No,” he responded cheerfully, then grimaced as if he'd just realized how unthinkable that was. “No! I've got children. I hope they'll enjoy some of it.”

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Correction, 5/2: An earlier version of this story misstated the name of Mr. Findlay's wife. It is Victoria, not Virginia.

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