

"All the News
That's Fit to Print"

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Southern California: Patchy, mainly morning clouds near the coast, highs in the 60s. Partly sunny in the interior, highs from the middle 70s to middle 80s. Weather map appears on Page 8.

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SundayStyles

Section 9

Selling Himself And Prints, Too



Ozler Muhammad/The New York Times

ART PITCHMAN Entrusted with a new gallery, Jacob Lewis is aiming to market printmaking to a younger audience.

By ALLEN SALKIN

THE e-mail message arrived in the middle of the night. Jacob Lewis had barely slept in four days, so nervous was he about the message he was awaiting last month from the artist Ryan McGinness. He had spent two years trying to convince his boss, Dick Solomon, an owner of the Pace Prints gallery on East 57th Street, that opening a location downtown would enable the company to attract a younger breed of artist and collector.

Mr. Lewis arrived in New York five years ago from West Virginia with little more than some lithographs he had made in college and a few mayonnaise jars of beechwood moonshine. Since then, the mission to which he has hitched his star is selling the idea that limited-edition printmaking is not, as many collectors believe, making posters, but is an important form involving ancient and newfangled techniques to create original works that sell for reasonable prices. The downtown gallery and Mr. McGinness were part of his plan.

Mr. Solomon had finally agreed to the gallery, in Chelsea on West 26th Street, appointing Mr. Lewis, 28, as director and Jeremy Dine, son of the artist Jim Dine, as manager. A nice achievement, but Mr. Lewis said he believed that without the right artist for the opening show this fall, the whole endeavor might fail.

Mr. Lewis had been courting Mr. McGinness, a rising star known for his stenciled soccer balls and silkscreen-strewn

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Ozler Muhammad/The New York Times

'COUNT ME IN' Ryan McGinness, left, at his Manhattan studio with Jacob Lewis, who set his sights on the artist and delivered a coup.

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paintings, for weeks, visiting his Chinatown studio, explaining the resources Pace would throw behind him.

"If he didn't do the show, then I was stuck with doing a group show, which comes off as being weak," Mr. Lewis said.

At 3:30 on a Monday morning near the end of March, Mr. Lewis opened an eye and threw out an arm to wake his computer nearby.

"Count me in," read the e-mail message from Mr. McGinness.

Later that morning, Mr. Lewis, who wears brown plastic-rimmed glasses, strode into an office where Mr. Solomon and Mr. Dine were working and burst with glee.

"Everything's coming up Millhouse!" he recalled saying, referring to an episode of "The Simpsons" in which the hopelessly geeky character Millhouse enjoys a lucky moment. "Dick didn't understand the reference, but Jeremy did."

Despite brutal apartment rents that have driven the young bohemian classes from the cultural centers, an untold number of would-be Schnabels and Currins arrive afresh each year to seek a foothold in a city that seems mainly hospitable to aspiring Bloomburys and Trumps. Most fail, some fast in a blaze of credit-card debt, some slowly in a smolder of ob-

curity. A precious few succeed. And some, like Mr. Lewis, who lives in a \$1,200-a-month studio in Harlem, are able to survive — and thrive — by tweaking their dreams enough to break through.

Unlike Millhouse, whose successes were limited to provincial Springfield, Mr. Lewis is becoming an unlikely star in a rarefied New York world. Born in Huntington, W. Va., the

mildly dyslexic son of the state's chief disciplinary lawyer and an office administrator, he is now throwing parties with heiresses, hobnobbing with art cognoscenti and managing to dress like a downtown dandy on a modest salary with no commissions.

¡Ay, Caramba!

Mr. Lewis isn't the artist he once hoped to be, but he is living parts of the life. Landing Mr. McGinness has been the most important moment so far.

"It is a coup," said Robin Cembal-est, executive editor of the magazine ARTnews. "McGinness is a guy who has had big shows at Jeffrey Deitch, has designed tableware for P. S. 1, and is having his first solo museum show next year."

A day after receiving Mr. McGinness's e-mail message, Mr. Lewis visited the East 57th Street apartment of Ashley Stark, 25, whose fam-

GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY

ily owns Stark Carpet, which sells floor coverings to designers. He wore a narrow-shouldered Trovata pin-stripe suit.

The two discussed details about a party they are giving later this month in her parents' penthouse for Ms. Stark's young, Upper East Side set. Mr. Lewis plans to deliver his gospel of print collecting, the same pitch he had given at a cocktail party a few weeks ago for young Campbell Lutyens hedge fund executives.

"The message is," Mr. Lewis said, "for a couple of thousand bucks you can buy a print that may go up in value, rather than a purse or a pair of shoes that are just going to fall apart."

Ms. Stark has bought three prints

for her apartment through Mr. Lewis: an acid etching of bubbles by Tara Donovan, a mixed-media print collage by Julian Schnabel and a pink and blue geometric patterned screen print by Bridget Riley.

"I trust somebody my own age more than an old man who doesn't know my taste or my sensibility," Ms. Stark said.

FROM there, Mr. Lewis took a taxi to Michael Steinberg's gallery in Chelsea. Mr. Lewis owed a final payment for a print he had bought for his own small collection, a spooky black-and-white etching by Inka Essenhigh.

Ms. Essenhigh, whose work is included at the current "Comic Abstraction" show at the Museum of Modern Art, is among the younger artists Mr. Lewis said he hopes will give printmaking the sexy excitement it had in the 1960s and 1970s, when vanguard artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol viewed it as an adjunct to painting, and museums put on shows.

"He has undertaken a mission," said Mr. Steinberg, who has been in the print business for three decades. "It takes the same amount of time to sell a \$100,000 painting as it does a \$10,000 print, and sometimes it's more effort because of the amount of work and education you have to do."

After Mr. Lewis was rejected from a summer art program at Yale, he

began giving up his own dreams of being an artist. "I just didn't have it," he said. A few jumbled boxes of slides deep in his closet are all he has left of his undergraduate paintings.

It was while interning that summer at the Pace printing studio on West 18th Street, where master printers use devices ranging from hand-cranked presses to speedboat-size ink jets capable of rendering images on sandpaper, that he

began to see another path to an interesting life.

On the day he received the e-mail message, he stopped at Mr. McGinness's studio on Centre Street to work out details about the show.

"For your show," Mr. McGinness said, "I'm cleansing the image palette and starting all over."

Mr. Lewis beamed.

Mr. Lewis seems to enjoy being in an artist's studio more than being in a socialite's apartment. (An attempt to meet Ms. Stark for a date soon after they had met did not yield fruit, Mr.

Lewis said.) But as much fun as he is having, his prospects for long-term success rest on his ability to make the Pace Prints gallery in Chelsea work.

Mr. Solomon, who is committing Pace to spend about \$125,000 a year on rent and \$250,000 on renovations for the third-floor gallery space, is betting big on his protégé.

"If he's wrong, we'll kill him," Mr. Solomon said. "If he's right, we'll give him a modest raise."

Money is one measurement of success. More elusive is credibility in the art world. Helianthe Bourdeaux-Maurin, an associate director of Parker's Box, a respected gallery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, that represents less-established artists than many of the Chelsea dealers, said it is mainly unadventurous collectors who buy prints.

"Some people would rather spend \$3,000 on a print by a big name than the same money on an emerging artist," she said. "Some people don't want to be edgy."

Hitching his fate to the stodgy name of Pace has served Mr. Lewis well thus far. One rainy night in March, he met a group of printmaking friends at the Tom & Jerry's bar in NoHo. Ruth Lingen, a printmaker, showed Mr. Lewis a print she had found at a thrift shop for a few dollars. She'd just had it confirmed that it was a Goya, worth \$3,000.

She told Mr. Lewis that her husband, Chip, has found a barn in the Hamptons, where the two men can curate a show this summer. "Chip is excited," Ms. Lingen said.

"O.K.," Mr. Lewis said. "I'll do whatever."



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