

## Artists and Dealers Prospect in the New Frontier



© Sue Williams, courtesy of 303 Gallery

Sue Williams, "Leo Strauss, Theoretician," 2008, Oil and acrylic on canvas

**By Sarah Douglas**

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This hasn't, by a long stretch, been the recession the art world thought it would be. Back in fall 2008, after **Lehman Brothers** collapsed and the auction market corrected with a vengeance, all the talk was of galleries closing. In a rousing performance at that year's **Art Basel Miami Beach** that was part consolation, part pep talk, critic Jerry Saltz predicted that as many as 100 dealers would have to shut down their operations due to the economic crisis. Fortunately that didn't happen — New York saw only about 25 closures, many of which were not directly linked to the downturn, and even more new galleries and arts spaces sprouted in their place. Instead, the major change to affect the gallery landscape in recent months has been a far less visible but just as significant development, namely that a number of artists — more, it seems, than in recent recessions — have been migrating from one dealer to another, exchanging old relationships for new opportunities and new business models. Among the artists whose recent decampments for greener (or at least more sustainable) pastures may surprise some observers are **Tom Friedman**, **Sue Williams**, and Thomas Houseago.

Whenever artists leave one gallery for another — or simply for the chance to explore what else is out there — it's a unique, personal matter, just like the ending of any other

relationship. It can be hard to tell which side lost interest first. But while this happens with some regularity in the art world, the uncertainty in the market over the past year and a half has led many artists and dealers to strategically cast about for new arrangements that promise both stability and the chance to grow and develop. Lingered lessons from the boom years apply as well, especially as the market seems to be returning — after all, the dealer-be-damned autonomy pioneered by Chinese contemporary artists, and most famously by Damien Hirst's nearly \$200 million **Sotheby's** sale in 2008, have opened cracks in the traditional artist-gallery relationship. Here, mirroring a pattern throughout the art world, the economic crisis has not ushered in a period of devastation, but one of reassessment.



© Jules de Balincourt, courtesy Zach Feuer Gallery, New York  
Jules de Balincourt's "Good, Bad, Ugly," 2008 oil-on-panel

Whereas in the past it was reliable rainmakers like Gagosian who were Hoovering up artists from smaller dealerships, for instance, there are now cases where artists appear to be reconsidering earlier moves to posh aeries. In the current climate, according to **Lehmann Maupin** gallery co-owner Rachel Lehmann, it may be tempting for "an artist who is considered blue-chip and desirable to leave one of the biggest galleries in New York to join a gallery that is not as powerful but will do more work for that artist." Such a transition may be underway in the case of Tom Friedman, who after severing relations four years ago with **Feature**, his longtime downtown gallery, to sign with Gagosian, has recently — and without fanfare — left that powerful showroom. Friedman's London dealer, Stephen Friedman (no relation), confirms the move and says the artist has yet to secure new representation in the United States. Meanwhile, the painter Sue Williams, who in 2006 left her New York dealer 303 Gallery for David Zwirner, has recently also reversed course. Several months ago, Williams quietly returned to 303.

Williams, who is known for squiggly canvases full of bodily humor, says Zwirner "treated me well and it was exciting to be there," but that with the onset of instability in the world at large, she "started missing the whole comfort, the homeyness" of her old gallery, which had represented her since early in her career. "It's a better place for me because I'm not as much out and staying in touch, so I need to feel that connection, which we'd developed." Williams further confides that she "always felt a little guilty having

left" 303. "People told me I shouldn't feel that way, but, you know, you always have a close relationship with your dealer. Otherwise I'm isolated in my studio in Brooklyn." (303 owner Lisa Spellman, who characterizes Williams' 2005 departure as "pretty heartbreaking," calls the artist's return "a nice reunion.")

Another example of an artist who has been shifting priorities is **Ghada Amer**, whose early career was built up by Jeffrey Deitch and subsequently by Gagosian, but who opted to sign on with the much smaller **Cheim & Read** last September. That gallery, which shows such notable female artists as Louise Bourgeois and Jenny Holzer — and represents the estate of Joan Mitchell — provides a weighty context for Amer's work, which is notable for its lubricious scenes of lesbian sex and masturbation. "When the market slows down, you can pause and look at things in the abstract," Adam Sheffer, a partner at Cheim & Read, says of Amer's decision. "We just loved her work and had followed it." He stressed, however, that the gallery hadn't poached the artist.

Intriguingly, the gallery moves these days seem less frantic than the ones that took place during the last major art market recession, in the early 1990s. At that time, a sky-is-falling panic led hot artists to scramble for galleries that could assure advances on future sales as a bulwark against the cratered economy, leading them to re-align themselves with whoever offered top dollar. Headline-grabbing switches at that time included David Salle's leaving Mary Boone for Gagosian (Salle has since returned to Boone), and Georg Baselitz's defection from Boone to **Pace** (Baselitz now shows at Gagosian, among other galleries). Then, when the market heated up in the midst of the 2000s boom, artists flocked to the loftier galleries, often with the reasoning that they could sell work simply on the basis of the brand name — and occasionally making hasty career choices in the process. Today, the switches are "more thoughtful and organized" according to art adviser Todd Levin. "There is less of a free-agent mentality" now, he says.

Dealers are watching the present changes keenly. "I'm seeing different kinds of movements, and we will see it happening more in next 12 months," says Rachel Lehmann. Of the several scenarios playing out at the moment, a gallery's strained relationship with a low-performing artist, exacerbated by the downturn, may be terminated — or, alternatively, these artists may leave when it appears they're getting the short shrift. In one head-turning example a year ago, at height of the recession, **Zach Feuer** dropped eight artists — almost half his stable — including **Danika Phelps** and **Christoph Ruckhaberle**.

Of course, there is also the case of the younger artist who's gained market traction and whose work has begun to require more space and monetary commitment, leading them to move to a more deep-pocketed showroom. Sterling Ruby, who also signed on with Pace recently and currently has a big-budget debut show in one of its vast Chelsea galleries, is an example of that. But showing with one gallery doesn't necessarily mean leaving your original dealer, even one in the same city. Ruby, for instance, who previously showed briefly with **Metro Pictures**, has maintained a relationship with his original New York dealer, **Foxy Production**, where he had a [critically acclaimed show last fall](#). **Peter Doig** also split a show of new work between **Michael Werner** and his longtime New York dealer **Gavin Brown** last year.

Thomas Houseago, a young Los Angeles-based sculptor whose rough-hewn remixes of high modernist sculpture have earned him a place in this year's Whitney Biennial, has been a prominent beneficiary of the period. After a dramatic winter that saw the artist emerge as one of the most buzzed-about young talents on the West Coast — in part due to his work's omnipresence at Art Basel Miami Beach — he recently left his L.A. dealer David Kordansky, and is now in discussions to show at **L&M Arts'** new Venice Boulevard space when the gallery opens there in September. "We have been very friendly with him and a huge admirer, and it organically came out of that relationship," says L&M L.A. director Sarah Watson of the talks. "His work fits perfectly with our vision for the gallery, our program of historical and contemporary work."



© Thomas Houseago. Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York

On April 15, Houseago is also scheduled to open his first New York solo show at Michael Werner Gallery, which now represents him in the city and also includes a range of elder statesmen, like **Sigmar Polke**, who provide an attractive historical anchor. (The L.A. sculptor Aaron Curry, a friend of Houseago's who is still represented on the west coast by Kordansky, also recently joined the gallery in New York.) As Gordon Veneklasen tells it, Werner's policy of not inflating its stars' primary market prices during the boom years also seems to appeal to ambitious younger artists who are looking to build enduring careers.

"The way we've always thought of things is that you put roots down with an artist and build the career through museum shows and placing artworks in the right way, you don't just think about money," he says. Before the recession, Veneklasen adds, "you had artists whose prices were pushed up, and who are now at a mid-career moment, who are looking back and saying, 'What didn't I do right here?'"

Another kind of switch is more or less lateral, like photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto's recent hop from **Gagosian** to PaceWildenstein, which the *New York Times* first reported

last month. When the moves have been between galleries of more or less equal standing but different concentrations, a certain spirit of amicability has presided. The artist Sean Landers had showed with Andrea Rosen Gallery since the early 1990s before recently moving a few doors down on 24th street to Friedrich Petzel (which will show his work in an **Armory Show** booth this week), but if Rosen's participation in a reading the artist held at **Saatchi & Saatchi's** space over the weekend is any indication, there are no hard feelings. In another split that both parties describe as friendly, the young sculptor Diana Al-Hadid left Chelsea's Perry Rubenstein Gallery, which meanwhile has become the exclusive representative of painter Annie Kevans, whose work is on view at the gallery now.

Gallery closures, while fewer than expected, have of course propagated their share of artist transitions. Other moves brought on by galleries closing have allowed edgy younger galleries to snap up talents with growing reputations. In the wake of Chelsea gallery **Klemens Gasser Grunert** shuttering a year and a half ago, mid-career painter Ann Craven recently signed on with Michele Maccarone. She will have her first show there, of a brand new series of paintings, in May. Maccarone characterizes the transition as "very easy going and non-strategic, and friendly, very organic." On the younger end of the artist spectrum, **Valerie Hegarty** will open her first solo show with Lower East Side gallery **Nicelle Beauchene** on March 4; Hegarty's former gallery, **Guild & Greyskul**, closed a year ago.

Throwing a wild card in the mix is Deitch's pending dissolution of his downtown gallery empire, expected sometime before he assumes the post of the L.A. **Museum of Contemporary Art's** director in June. Deitch artists, not surprisingly, are being quietly shopped around the gallery world's back channels. As Josh Baer revealed recently in his Baer Faxt e-mail newsletter, Robert Lazzarini's show that had been planned with the dealer — only to be derailed when Deitch's Grand Street gallery became unusable due to neighboring construction — will now take place as a non-selling exhibition at Chelsea's **Flag Art Foundation**. (It's an extension of the show Lazzarini recently had at the **Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art** in Ridgefield, Connecticut.) Lazzarini has also signed on with **Honor Fraser** gallery in Los Angeles. Meanwhile, painter Jules de Balincourt, one of the few artists to leave Zach Feuer voluntarily since the economic collapse, has a show scheduled at Deitch's Wooster Street space in April, but can say goodbye to any hope he'd be represented by him past that.

As confidence returns to the art market, some moves are afoot that defy easy explanation. Rising talent Rashid Johnson, who was a star of the "30 Americans" show at the **Rubell Family Collection** last year (his work graced the catalogue's cover) recently left his New York gallery, Nicole Klagsbrun, which has been in business for more than 20 years. What might be next? According to Todd Levin, it would be wise in this unsettled climate to stay tuned for the unexpected. Canny artists and dealers, meanwhile, stand to carve out new places in the art world. "The Chinese character for confusion is the same character for opportunity," he says. "There's a way of using this moment to your advantage."