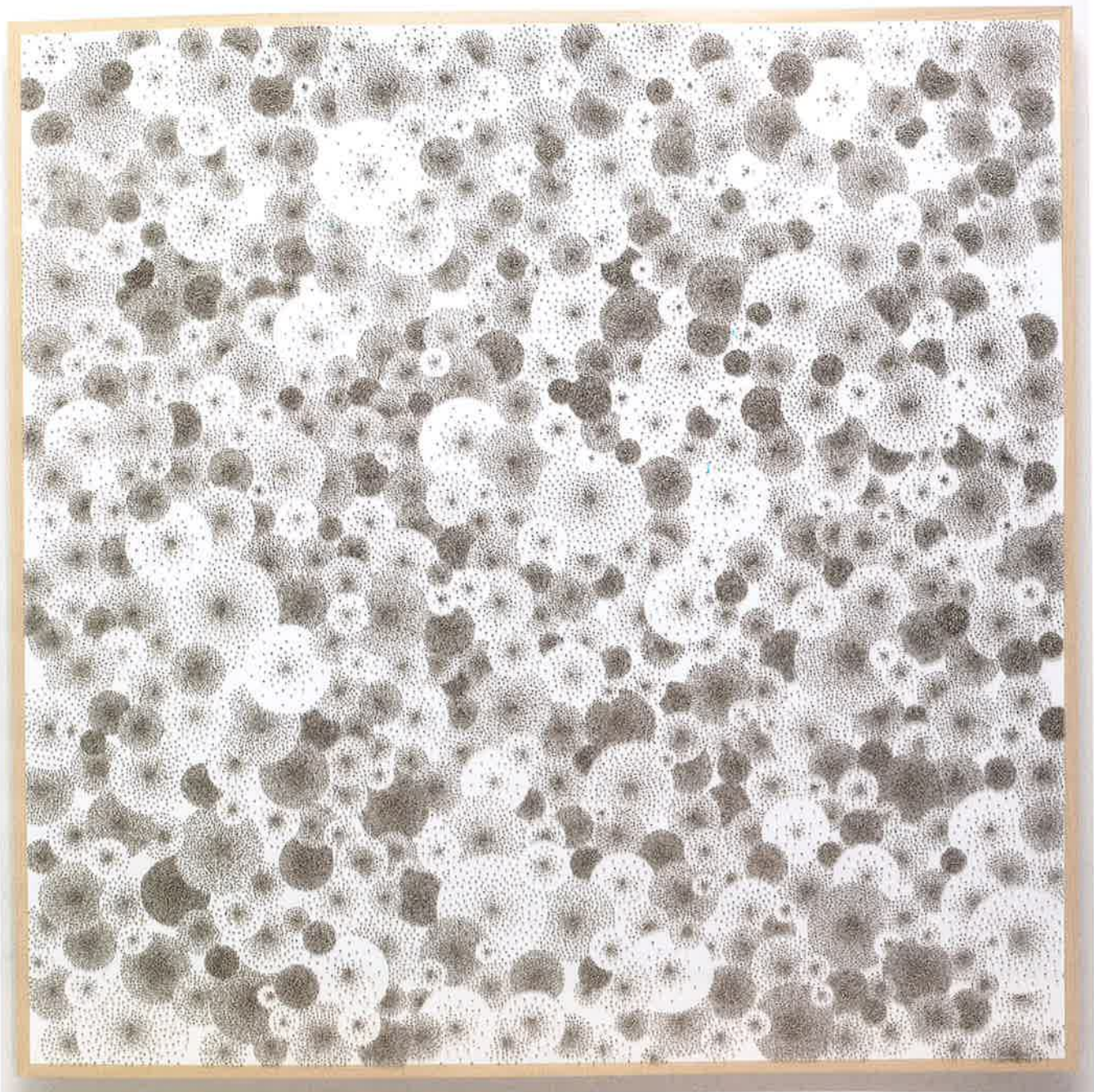




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**Tara Donovan, *Untitled Drawing (Pins)*, 2010**, gatorboard, paint and nickel-plated steel pins, 48 x 48 x 3 in. (121.9 x 121.9 x 7.6 cm)  
© Tara Donovan, Courtesy The Pace Gallery, Photo by: G.R. Christmas / Courtesy The Pace Gallery.

# SIGNS OF LIFE

BY JULIE L. BELCOVE

It was a night of celebration — the 50th anniversary of the Pace Gallery — and artists like Chuck Close and James Siena mingled with collectors and curators in front of iconic works that had passed through the gallery's doors, including Jasper Johns' *Three Flags*, the first painting by a living artist to hit the \$1 million mark (back in 1980). Tara Donovan, known for creating beguiling, abstract sculptures from mass quantities of everyday materials, such as toothpicks, drinking straws or paper plates, and at 41 one of the youngest artists on Pace's roster, gathered a few friends and led them past a security guard to a private viewing room in one of the West 25th Street galleries. There, taken from her Williamsburg studio just that morning, hung a diptych, striking from a distance, startling up close. The two six-foot-square "drawings" were actually reliefs composed of straight pins, thousands upon thousands of them. Donovan, along with a crew of assistants, had spent months pounding the pins into the wood and Gatorboard panels.

Her exhibition at Pace isn't until February, but the diptych, along with about five other finished *Untitled Drawings (Pins)*, is already sold. Donovan's dealer, Pace president Marc Glimcher, is hoping she'll have completed another 10 or so by the opening. He brought the first of the series to Art Basel Miami Beach last year and says collectors were lining up for the chance to buy one. "When the response is that spectacular and production is that slow, there's going to be this pent-up demand," Glimcher says.

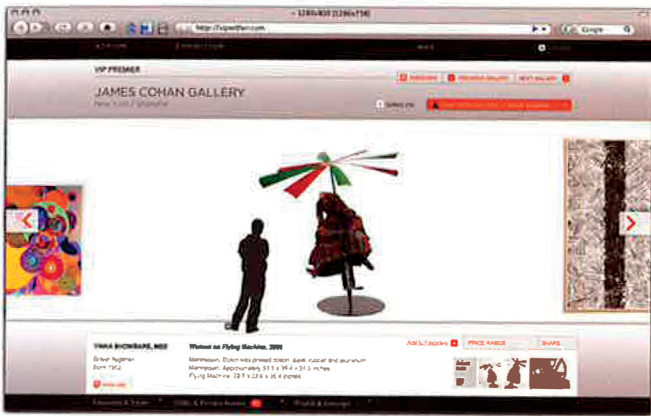
The healthy appetite for Donovan's work may not herald a return to waiting lists as a matter of routine, but it does speak to the renewed optimism in the contemporary art market. Art dealers and collectors alike agree that when presented with work from a critically acclaimed artist at a fair price — though Donovan's prices have risen into the six figures, her gallery has cautiously kept them from reaching the stratosphere — the buyer is again at the ready, checkbook in hand.

If anything, art professionals are amazed that the downturn was as short and as relatively gentle as it was. In the aftermath of the financial markets' meltdown in the fall of 2008, "sales essentially stopped," as Glimcher puts it. Galleries quickly cut prices, some by 30 percent or more, and several younger galleries closed, most prominently Rivington Arms. Suddenly, collectors who'd been priced out of the red-hot market were getting cold calls from panicky dealers. But since then business has resumed, and there are signs of growth on many fronts, from robust auctions to galleries expanding to some artists' prices rising again.

Christie's, for one, planned for an art recession of at least three or four years, if not longer, according to Brett Gorvy, international co-head of contemporary art and deputy chairman at the auction house. Only 68 percent of the lots sold at its crucial November 2008 evening sale, making just 55 percent of the dollar estimate, so Gorvy says the stellar results at the Yves Saint Laurent sale three months later came as a shocker. "We were not only seeing all the major players returning," he says, "but the prices achieved were higher than we expected, even in the boom period. It really demonstrated very quickly the return of confidence and very, very aggressive buying."

Gorvy adopted a strategy designed to increase the sales rate, even if it meant offering a fraction of the number of lots of past sales. The mission, he explains, was to instill confidence in the prices, on the part of both buyers and sellers. In addition, he says, many consignors turned to the auction houses' private sales department to dispose of works discreetly, in part because Christie's and Sotheby's had abandoned the practice of offering lucrative price guarantees, and in part because "they didn't necessarily want to signal to the market they were selling."

The auction powerhouses wisely kept estimates low, creating what Gorvy describes as a "pressure-cooker" on the brand-name objects: Hungry collectors considered them undervalued and bid



Conceptual screen shot of a virtual booth at VIP Art Fair: James Cohan Gallery presenting art in relation to other art and in relative scale. VIP Art Fair, with major galleries from around the world participating, is the first virtual art fair, and is the brainchild of James and Jane Cohan and Silicon Valley vets, Jonas and Alessandra Almgren. Courtesy VIP Art Fair.

competitively. Sotheby's in November 2009, for example, estimated Warhol's *200 One Dollar Bills* at \$8 million to \$12 million; it went for \$43.7 million. Christie's, in its May 2010 sale of the late writer Michael Crichton's collection, estimated Jasper Johns' *Flag* at \$10 million to \$15 million; the final price, \$28.6 million, set a record for the artist. Every last lot sold.

Most art insiders interviewed for this story say that the market never collapsed to the extent it did in the early nineties or in 1980, and they all gave as the primary reason the art world's sheer size. There are simply many, many more collectors now. With active buyers from Russia, Asia, the Middle East, Brazil and India added to the pot, Gorvy notes that art may be the one true global commodity. "If you're selling an apartment in Chicago, it's a pretty limited number of people who are going to look at it," he says. "If you're selling a Warhol, the target audience is the world."

That goes not only for the auction houses, with their mammoth data banks, but for smaller scale operations with, say, one location and a regular art-fair presence. When Perry Rubenstein, whose artists include emerging talent Robin Rhode, receives a new work in his Chelsea gallery, "I can send [an image of] it to 10 people worldwide," he says, "not just 10 people on Park Avenue." Though he emphasizes that JPEGs have revolutionized the way dealers do business, Rubenstein also says it is now imperative for dealers to travel more, and he has been spending considerably more time in Mexico and Latin America. "Why does Larry have 12 galleries?" he says, referring, of course, to Mr. Gagosian, who is actually opening his

tenth in November, in Geneva. "Not because he loves real estate. Because he knows there's wealth there. He's always taken the business where the money is. Anybody who's not traveling is going to be very disappointed."

The second economic factor at play in the art market's rebound is collectors' faith that art is a better bet than the stock market. "You're earning nothing on your cash," says one prominent New York collector who works in the financial industry. "People perceive art to be an inflation hedge. Whether it is or isn't, I'm not sure."

The often unspoken caveat is that the work needs to be by an artist with proven staying power. Richter, Twombly and Warhol all qualify. But even someone who was as in-demand as Richard Prince can be on shaky ground. Several dealers and collectors cited Prince as a case study: Pre-downturn, one of his new paintings reportedly could go for \$1 million at Gagosian. After the fall, that price was slashed in half. Now, it is said to be back up to \$800,000 or \$900,000.

Dominique Levy, a partner in L&M Arts, which deals heavily in the secondary market, has noticed spikes — or plunges — in call volume as the currency markets rise and fall. But collectors, she says, are growing increasingly discerning. They want "something rare and of the highest quality. It's not, 'I like it, I buy it,' anymore," she says. "Now they have an art advisor and ask three people's opinions." A positive side effect: "More and more collectors are starting to see the difference between good art and bad art."

Left:

As a location, Venice was a logical choice for L&M Arts' expansion in southern California, with a vibrant and robust art culture and community that is home to many leading artists. Kulapat Yantrasast, of WHY Architecture, was recruited to design the new gallery, which consists of two pavilions: a renovated former power station and a dramatic, new structure that echoes the existing building. Each building has 1200 sq. ft. of exhibition space connected by a streamlined plaza. Yantrasast has continued his dedication to green materials by refurbishing the original building and by using recycled brick from old Downtown LA for the new gallery.

Right:

in September 2010, Sperone Westwater opened a 20,000 gross square feet new space on the Bowery, a few doors down from the New Museum. Responding to the compact 25 by 100 foot site, one of the features of the project is a 12 by 20 foot moving gallery, connecting the upper four exhibition floors and allowing visitors to travel gradually between levels. Norman Foster commented: "The concept for Sperone Westwater represents both a response to the Bowery's dynamic urban character and a desire to rethink the way in which we engage with art in the setting of a gallery. The moving gallery animates the exterior of the building and creates a bold vertical element within. Like a kinetic addition to the street, it is a lively symbol of the area's reinvention and a daring response to the Sperone Westwater's major program." Sperone Westwater, Building Exterior, 257 Bowery, New York, NY © Nigel Young/ Foster + Partners.



The market correction did not put a stop to Levy's and her partner, Robert Mnuchin's, plans to expand to Los Angeles in the hopes of establishing more of a primary-market presence. They opened their new gallery in September with a Paul McCarthy show. "It's not crazily big," Levy says of the new space. "It was not something we felt would be strangling us if it did not produce immediately."

Sperone Westwater also powered ahead with plans for an eight-story building, designed by Sir Norman Foster, on the Bowery. (A few weeks into the inaugural show — recent works by Guillermo Kuitca — Westwater reports that all but one painting had sold.) Pace is planning satellites in Shanghai and Hong Kong (it already has an outpost in Beijing), and there are persistent rumors it intends to be a major player in London. Even the Whitney Museum of American Art, which had put the brakes on plans for a new Renzo Piano-designed building adjacent to lower Manhattan's High Line, this fall announced a May 2011 groundbreaking. Moreover, Whitney director Adam Weinberg says, "We have actually had more people approach us about making major gifts both of individual works and of collections."

But as dealers report foot traffic slowing in galleries — they put much of the blame on images beaming to smart phones worldwide in seconds — some have undertaken a new-fangled experiment in virtual expansion.

Capitalizing on the dual explosions of art fairs' popularity and that digital dissemination of images, gallerist James Cohan and his wife, Jane, conceived the VIP Art Fair, a one-week online event taking place in January. Teaming with Silicon Valley veterans Jonas and Alessandra Almgren, the Cohans developed an interactive

website that will enable galleries to invite their clients to browse and to confer with dealers live. As of press time, about 100 galleries, including blue-chip outfits like White Cube and David Zwirner, as well as galleries with an emerging-artist bent, had signed on from 26 countries. The two couples began toying with the idea three years ago, but Jane Cohan says the bubble-burst did not give them cold feet. On the contrary, they firmly believed in periods of economic stress as a ripe time for innovation. To that end, VIP (which stands for Viewing in Private) visitors will be able to zoom in to examine the surface of an artwork, see three-dimensional works in the round, and, to get a sense of scale, view a piece hanging on a wall.

Anticipating a global audience, VIP's organizers are urging galleries to staff their "booths" 18 hours a day, which, Cohan says, isn't all that different from the time clocked at brick-and-mortar fairs, what with all the attendant dinners and parties. This being a virtual fair, however, "you can do it from the comfort of your home," she notes. "You can view in your pajamas."

Business will be conducted much the same as at a destination fair, with galleries and collectors engaging in private negotiations and, hopefully, striking deals. It's neither first-come, first-served, nor highest bidder prevails, and don't even bother looking for the PayPal logo. As Cohan says, "There's no shopping cart." □

JULIE L. BELCOVE HAS WRITTEN ABOUT THE CONTEMPORARY ART WORLD FOR NEARLY FIFTEEN YEARS. SHE SERVED AS DEPUTY EDITOR OF *W* FOR MORE THAN NINE YEARS, AND SHE CONCEIVED AND EDITED THE MAGAZINE'S ANNUAL ART ISSUE. SHE IS NOW A FREELANCE WRITER BASED IN NEW YORK.