

WSJ.
Magazine

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The Business
of Being
ANNA

By Joshua Levine

PLUS, ART & COMMERCE:

CARLOS SLIM builds a museum |||| LUCIAN FREUD chats about his dealer |||| Iraq returns to the BIENNALE |||| CHRISTO after Jeanne-Claude

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“One day, Lucian calls and says, ‘Bill, the painting’s had a sex change.’ I said, ‘What are you talking about?’ He said, ‘Well, you know Jerry Hall didn’t show up for two sittings, so I changed her into a man’”

—BILL ACQUAVELLA ON LUCIAN FREUD, P. 16

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Tour Philip Johnson's little-known masterwork, the Pre-Columbian Pavilion, tucked into the garden of Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., then have a snoop through decorator and bon vivant Nicky Haslam's country house. This issue and past issues of WSJ Magazine are always available at wsjmagazine.com.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JASON SCHMIDT; CHARLES MASTERS; SIMON UPTON; ANDREW ROWAT



For our April issue, the concept of art in the current age informs several of our regular features. The way in which the theme threads so seamlessly through various pieces is a testament to the way art influences the world we live in.

In “The Partnership,” we routinely subvert the straight-up profile by having two people talk about the role their relationship plays in defining who they are as individuals. Lucian Freud, who is almost as well-known for his reclusive and libertine ways as he is for being one of the most important painters of our time, may seem an odd match for the very refined, very uptown William Acquavella, his friend and dealer for two decades. And yet they are perfect partners: joined by deep respect and their love for art.

We also feature the conceptual artist Christo, whose wife and artistic co-creator of nearly 50 years, Jeanne-Claude, died in 2009. It really is a “Partnership” story as well, for his wife’s presence is felt everyday as he carries on in the life they made together, while also moving forward with projects they began decades ago. Both the story and the new book “The Long Goodbye” by its author, Meghan O’Rourke, make clear that we are never entirely separated from those who help define us, even when they are gone. ♦



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It all begins with art: A watercolor by interior decorator Nicky Haslam for a private client in England. See p. 58 for a look inside Haslam’s storied country house.

THE PARTNERSHIP

The Master and the Gallerist

Lucian Freud, the British realist painter and famed libertine, and his genteel New York dealer, William Acquavella, have a 20-year relationship based on creative support and a little bit of damage control

ON SOME COSMIC PALETTE OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS, they were an unlikely blend: William Acquavella, the self-effacing head of a tony Upper East Side gallery that specialized in secondary-market selling of masterworks by Picasso and Matisse, and Lucian Freud, the notoriously reclusive and irascible painter with a lively personal life (which inevitably invites mention of his grandfather Sigmund)—“a kind of slumming Faust,” as one account put it, “who prowls lowlife pubs and eats woodcock for breakfast”—and whose work had just taken a dramatic turn toward monumental nudes of a corpulent performance artist.

And yet over the past two decades this improbable pairing has become one of the art world’s most remarkable—and profitable—partnerships. In Acquavella, Freud, then a painter whose reputation was largely confined to England, his home country, got access to new markets and new collectors. When asked what part Acquavella had in transforming his career, the painter replies with signature terseness: “A lot.” In Freud, Acquavella got an artist who was, in retirement age, arguably just coming into his full prowess—Freud would soon be lauded by art critic Robert Hughes as the world’s “greatest living realist painter.”

The pair agree that trust is what makes their union work. “His word is as good as gold—I’ve made sure mine is too,” says Acquavella. Freud, who calls him William where all others call him Bill, speaks of Acquavella in terms that are powerful in their brevity. “He’s a gentleman,” he says, brandishing the word like some older social code that needs no elaboration.

One of the qualities Acquavella prizes in Freud is his tidal constancy: At age 88, with a colossal show in 2010 at Paris’s Centre Pompidou and a big retrospective looming next year in London, Freud still works on one painting during the day, another at night, mixing the color anew with each dip of the brush. “He went from having no money, actually owing money, to having money, and there’s not one change,” Acquavella says.

For his part, Acquavella, who projects probity and gravitas, has an acumen for smoothing over any feathers ruffled by Freud. Like the time Freud became, as Acquavella says, “disenchanted” with the sitter of a portrait and, in response to the subject’s insistence he finish it, promptly took a knife and cut the face out of the canvas, leaving Acquavella to do damage control—and, as it happens, sell the spatially reduced painting. And dealing with a personality of Gibraltarian intransigence also requires a keen awareness of boundaries. Shortly after taking Freud on, Acquavella was contacted by composer Andrew Lloyd Webber, who was eager to be painted by Freud. “I told him, ‘This is great, I’m sure he’d pay a handsome price.’” Freud’s answer was brutally to the point: “His face is too soft.” “And that,” says Acquavella, “was the end of that.”



THE COMPANY OF MEN
Lucian Freud (seated), his dealer, gallerist William Acquavella, and dog Eli at his London studio (Freud’s nude of David Dawson, his assistant, in background). Opposite: Acquavella (left) sitting for Freud.



FREUD on ACQUAVELLA

I USED TO SEE WILLIAM AT THE HOME OF MY LIFELONG FRIEND David Somerset [chairman of Marlborough Fine Art and the 11th Duke of Beaufort]. We have lunch together often, usually at his house in Chelsea, and sometimes with a few other people. That's where I first met William and his wife.

My dealer at the time was not as keen on the male nudes as I wanted him to be. I knew William had a good gallery in New York, with a good reputation. He seemed to be a gentleman, I liked him, he liked my work, and there appeared to be goodwill on both sides. When William walked into the studio, all the Leigh Bowery paintings were there; he was knocked out by them. You'd think a rather uptown, established gallerist would be slightly put off, but not a bit of it. He just thought these were remarkable paintings. We shook hands. It was that simple. We never looked back.

Like any good relationship, a relationship between an artist and his dealer is based on trust. We have a really good friendship—we speak almost every day on the telephone, about people we know in common, or a collector buying a painting, or there's just an enjoyment in describing to him on the telephone what I've been painting. He has a genuine interest. There's a real working friendship there.

William's one of the very few people who will see a work in progress. It does make me nervous; I don't think it's good for a painting to be seen halfway through. William doesn't try to influence the work in any way, nor could he. I would never take commissions to paint. That means you're required to produce something that somebody likes. William understands that. When it's done it goes straight on to New York.

We do a couple of day trips every now and again. William's got his wonderful private jet, and we make use of that. In the spring we went to Paris for the Pompidou opening and then on to Madrid for the Prado, which was closed on the Monday, but it was arranged that we could go in and walk around on our own. William sets up things like that. You drive on the runway right to the plane, nip down to Madrid,

look at some paintings for an hour or two, have a fantastic lunch, then zip back on the plane and you're home by teatime. It's not too disruptive.

I always choose who I'm going to paint. On one level this is done based on the company—if I like being in their company, having them in my thoughts. I think my portrait of William shows the toughness in him. He's very top of the world; that level of self-control is there, it's all tied in the ways he's led his life, the decisions he's made. I think all that shows through in the portrait.

'I would never take commissions to paint. That means you're required to produce something that somebody likes'



ACQUAVELLA on FREUD

I HAD MET LUCIAN A FEW TIMES IN LONDON. HE'D HAD A FALLING out with his dealer. For two years he had no representation. A friend told me Lucian Freud wanted to have lunch with me when I came to London. I told a few friends. They said, "Oh, he's doing these male nudes now, he's difficult, it's going to be tough." So I go to lunch, thinking, how am I going to get out of this? And he says, "Will you come back to the studio?" He starts pulling out these pictures of Leigh Bowery. They were unbelievable. So I bought them all and made a deal that I would represent him world-wide. He said fine, we shook hands and that was the end of it.

When I took him on, he said to me, "I've got a bookie—and I've got a bill with him." I figured, let me talk to him, I'll pay it. So I have dinner with him—Alfie McLean, one of the largest bookmakers in Northern Ireland—and I said, "Alfie, what does he owe you?"

He says, "2.7 million pounds." I said, "OK, thanks [laughing]." We had to work this out.

When I sat for him, I went for three different sessions. From 8:30 in the morning until 3 in the afternoon, seven days a week, two weeks at a time. It was the most intense thing I've ever done, but I loved every minute of it. Lucian loves to gossip, talk about current events, he has a fantastic memory for poetry and songs. He told me a great story about Francis Bacon. Bacon used to have these really huge forearms, so he started mixing his colors on his forearm in the beginning. But it became

toxic and he had to stop after a while.

There is no influencing Lucian on what to paint. Absolutely none. That's great, that's what you wanted. He's not going to paint something because he thinks it's going to sell. He'll do the opposite, paint something he doesn't think will sell.

Jerry Hall was married to Mick Jagger, and they had a baby. Jerry is sitting for Lucian, he's got her nursing her baby in the background; in the foreground there's a couch with a man reading a book and an open window down the street. It's a big picture, fabulous picture. So Jagger calls me up and says he'd like to buy it. I say it's not even finished. We negotiate, I sell him the picture. One day, Lucian calls and says, "I want you to be the first to know: The painting's had a sex change." I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "Well, Jerry didn't show up for two sittings so I changed her into a man. I've got David's [Dawson, his long-time assistant] head on her body." I said, "You've got to be crazy"; but I knew immediately there was nothing I could do. Mick calls me up and says, "Hey, Bill, what the hell is going on? My wife sits with him for four months and..." Then I thought: How am I ever going to sell this picture? The first person who saw it when I brought it back to America bought the picture.

'Lucian said, "I've got a bookie—and I've got a bill." So I said to the bookie, "What does he owe you?" He says, "2.7 million pounds"'