

BLOUIN ARTINFO

Published on *Artinfo* (<http://artinfo.com>)

"Museum-Quality" Moneymakers: Why Are London's Commercial Galleries Rushing to Host Non-Commercial Shows?

Language

English



© Lucian Freud; Courtesy Lucian Freud Archive

"Man with Folded Hands," 1944, is among Lucian Freud's works on paper displayed at Blain/Southern's new Hill Street venue in London. Co-organized with the artist's New York dealer, Aquavella Galleries, the exhibition was originally planned to tour museums.

by Judd Tully, Art+Auction

Published: March 29, 2012



The April 2012 issue of Art+Auction

With auctions and art fairs hogging so much of the limelight these days, galleries are moving in on museum turf to draw much-needed attention. During the London auctions of contemporary and Imp/mod art in February, several private galleries in Mayfair touted their own miniblockbusters: high-profile, not-for-sale loan exhibitions of work by modern and contemporary masters. The accompanying catalogues will endure as important scholarly contributions on key 20th-century artists. The real aim, however, was to attract interest, and not just that of wealthy buyers. The lasting payoff for the galleries, in terms of relationships solidified and networks built, will be difficult for those outside to gauge.

“First of all, it’s very prestigious. It’s a way of saying, ‘We’re so successful, we don’t need to sell anything,’” observes **Wendy Goldsmith**, a London-based private art adviser. “The other reason is that technically nothing is for sale, but don’t think they’re not approached for the very good things. It’s also a clever way to get close to an artist or artist’s foundation or estate. Not only will you be approached for works in the show, even if they’re not for sale, but if someone wants to sell something privately and not through an auction house, where are they going to turn? It’s very clever for a multitude of reasons, but you need very deep pockets to do it.”

“From a commercial standpoint, it’s a long-term view,” notes **Nicholas Maclean** in the sleek back room of the **Eykyn Maclean** gallery on St. George Street. The space was inaugurated this season with “**Cy Twombly** —Works from the Sonnabend Collection,” featuring an elegant display of 11 works, including the artist’s 1956 breakout painting, “Untitled (New York City).” “As a private dealer, you have a certain number of clients and that becomes your world, yet there are many others out there who can find out what you are doing.” His partner, **Christopher Eykyn**, adds, “It gives us exposure that otherwise we wouldn’t be having.”

A week after the Twombly opening, the **Ordovas** gallery on nearby Savile Row debuted “**Julio González: First Master of the Torch.**” It is the first exhibition in London devoted to the Spanish sculptor since a **Whitechapel Art Gallery** exhibition in 1990. Including not-for-sale works by artists influenced by González, such as **Anthony Caro**, **Eduardo Chillida**, **Picasso**, and **David Smith**, the show came on the heels of Ordovas’s inaugural show last October, “Irrational Marks: **Bacon** and **Rembrandt.**” Also pegged as noncommercial, that display included loans like Rembrandt’s *Self-Portrait with Beret*, circa 1659, from the **Musée Granet** in Aix-en-Provence. For this outing, Ordovas ran into a big roadblock when a temporary export license for four of the eight González works from the **Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno** were delayed due to a bureaucratic snafu in Spain, and the exhibition opened without some of its star pieces.

“My aim is to show a museum-quality program of 20th-century art,” says **Pilar Ordovas**, a former head of postwar and contemporary art at **Christie’s** in London and, more briefly, a veteran of **Gagosian Gallery**.

“With my current exhibition, all the loans except one are institutional and there is nothing for sale: This is a noncommercial exhibition. My commercial activity involves advising clients and helping them navigate the market in a one-to-one, discreet, and personal way.”

Perhaps the most stunning of these recent private endeavors is “**Lucian Freud Drawings**,” which inaugurated **Blain/Southern**’s Hill Street town house location. With more than 110 works spanning Freud’s career, it is the largest selection of the artist’s drawings ever assembled. It opened just days after the highly anticipated Lucian Freud retrospective at London’s **National Portrait Gallery** and as other Freud works on paper, including important early examples from the 1940s, were being offered at both Christie’s and **Sotheby’s**. And Blain/Southern put on an ancillary show of related material, “Lucian Freud Drawings Archive,” at its nearby Dering Street location.

While Eykyn Maclean and Ordovas are strictly secondary-market salons for Impressionist, modern, and contemporary works, Blain/Southern is involved in representing living artists, and some might think this is a selling show, but the exhibition was originally conceived for an institution. “There was no expectation it would come to us, ever,” says **Graham Southern**. “The initial idea was a Dutch museum and maybe a Swiss museum and possibly bringing it back to London. It was all quite fluid. It eventually hit the wall.” Adds partner **Harry Blain**, “It was actually Lucian’s suggestion to do it at our gallery. The only disappointing thing was that he wasn’t around to see it through to fruition.”

Though Freud didn’t live to see the exhibition, whose works were selected by Freud expert and friend **William Feaver**, the artist approved of the venture and helped ensure that almost 100 percent of the loan requests were met. Freud even allowed about 16 drawings to be removed from his 1940s sketchbooks and included in the exhibition. “This was very much a show driven through conversations and friendship with Lucian,” says Southern. It therefore seems especially appropriate “to show the private and personal side in a slightly more residential situation.” To help preserve the show’s intimacy, the dealers control entrance through advance ticketing.

Both the Twombly and the Freud shows are traveling to New York in the spring, Twombly heading to Eykyn Maclean’s outpost on East 67th Street this month, and the Freud in May to **Acquavella Galleries**, the late artist’s dealer, which is credited with co-organizing the exhibition. Of course, New York has been home to high-profile loan shows in galleries before, most notably Gagosian’s stagings of work by **Piero Manzoni**, **Claude Monet**, and Picasso. And last year Acquavella mounted a major **Georges Braque** exhibition accompanied by a scholarly catalogue.

At the moment, however, conditions in London are ideal for these high-caliber showcases, especially given the city’s popularity with Russians and others who want to be inconspicuous in spending what U.K. tax authorities categorize as nondomiciled wealth. “The geographical position of London has given the city a greater advantage, and obviously, it’s not just the home of European collectors,” Ordovas observes. “It has attracted Asians and other communities and made it much easier in every way to access a lot of people who don’t intend to go to New York or do not have second homes in America. I think it’s mainly why we’re seeing American galleries establishing themselves in London for the first time.”

Ordovas is referring to **Pace Gallery**, which opened an office last year on Lexington Street in Soho while shopping for a bigger location in Mayfair, and also to the **David Zwirner** gallery. That powerhouse has snagged a major space in Mayfair, where it will open its first satellite space outside New York in October.

“Mayfair is nice and central,” says Blain, referring to the gallery enclave. “People stay in this area when they’re coming to London — at least a lot of the collectors and curators and museum directors do. It’s all

about making it as easy as possible for people to see exhibitions and to engage with the art while in London.”

by Judd Tully, Art+Auction, [Art+Auction Magazine](#), [Art+Auction Magazine](#)