

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

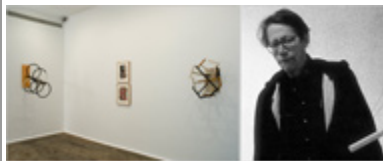
Art

Death Can Be a Canny Career Move

By DOROTHY SPEARS

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FOR years, when the artist Steven Parrino wasn't jamming power chords on his electric guitar or tinkering with his motorcycle in his garagelike studio in Brooklyn, he was recycling his unsold paintings: twisting them into eccentric new shapes, smashing their stretcher bars or stabbing them repeatedly with scissors.



Courtesy Zwirner and Wirth, left; Shoichiro Higuchi/Courtesy of Zwirner & Wirth

This year Zwirner & Wirth presented an exhibition of works, left, by Al Taylor, right, who died in 1999.



Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, left; CÉdric Degrange

A retrospective of Steven Parrino's works, left, surfaced at the Gagosian Gallery in September. Mr. Parrino, right, who recycled his unsold paintings, died from injuries he suffered in a motorcycle accident in 2005.

His destructive approach to art making earned him the admiration of some fellow artists, but it also concealed a painful reality: There was no market for his work. In eight

years and five solo New York shows, his former dealer José Freire said, he sold only two of Mr. Parrino's paintings, one for \$9,000 and the other for \$10,000.

Then, on New Year's Day 2005, Mr. Parrino died from injuries suffered in a motorcycle accident. Demand for his art has since increased, and in September a Parrino retrospective that had toured European museums surfaced at the Gagosian Gallery on Madison Avenue. With Gagosian's high-profile endorsement and a limited number of works for sale — only two paintings and a dozen drawings out of 56 exhibited works — the top price for a Parrino in that show reached nearly \$1 million.

Mr. Parrino's posthumous ascent was not an anomaly.

While Gagosian was busy folding unsold Parrinos into its seasonal repertory, Zwirner & Wirth was plotting a comparable resuscitation of the career of Al Taylor, who died in 1999 of lung cancer. And Jay Gorney and his colleagues at Mitchell-Innes & Nash gallery were busy tapping collectors and auction houses for paintings by Jack Goldstein, who committed suicide in 2003.

Call it the Dawn of the Dead Artist. The message from the market is as clear as it is macabre. In a quest for fresh material, blue-chip contemporary-art dealers are finding a healthy source of revenue buried six feet under.

With the soaring prices of contemporary art, dealers admit that they have a strategic incentive to seek dead artists and give them recognition. "It's supply and demand," said David Zwirner, the Chelsea dealer and co-owner in Zwirner & Wirth, which represents Mr. Taylor's estate. He said the limited inventory imposed by an artist's death can end up increasing prices.

"Although overall market conditions are not our only motivation, we are a for-profit gallery," he added. "There is a commercial angle, or we'd be going out of business."

All dead artists are not created equal, however. Several other important factors are at work in the surge of interest in Mr. Parrino, Mr. Taylor and Mr. Goldstein. First, all three were active in the 1980s, a period now considered hot.

"It's very infrequent to find an artist of this period that you'd never even heard of," said Zwirner & Wirth's director, Kristine Bell, referring to Mr. Taylor.

Second, each artist's work fits into the context of each gallery's artists. Mr. Parrino, for example, is right at home in the somewhat macho male club at Gagosian, which shows the likes of Richard Prince and Richard Serra. And Mr. Taylor's playful use of materials and droll one-liners aligns with Zwirner & Wirth artists like Richard Tuttle and Fred Sandback, for whom the gallery already has an established and devoted client base.

Mitchell-Innes & Nash, where Mr. Gorney described programming as "intergenerational, and gravitating toward artists who challenge media genres," seems a cozy niche for Mr. Goldstein's provocative disregard for traditional image making.

And even if they did not strike gold during their lifetimes, Mr. Parrino, Mr. Taylor and Mr. Goldstein had earned the respect of their peers, as van Gogh had before he died, adding to the credibility of their newfound status.

Despite the market parallels, the work of the three artists could hardly be more different. In his embrace of the American road, for example, Mr. Parrino, born in 1958, mined multiple sources, from zombie movies to underground literature to punk rock and extreme metal. (He often gave reverb and feedback performances in conjunction with his exhibitions.) Convinced that painting was dead, he then tried to jump-start it.

A onetime assistant to Robert Rauschenberg, Mr. Taylor shunned heroic impulses. Combining discarded objects like broomstick handles with absurdist gestures and lighthearted wordplay, Mr. Taylor even based a series of work on dog-urine stains, a joking reference to the so-called accidents and heroic mark making of Abstract Expressionists like Jackson Pollock and Morris Louis.

Spectacle was a primary focus for Mr. Goldstein, who had himself buried alive in 1972 while a student at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia. With a stethoscope attached to his chest, he breathed air from plastic tubes while a red light above ground flashed to the rhythm of his beating heart. Like his performances Mr. Goldstein's short films, his recordings of sound effects — like barking dogs and fog horns — and eventually his paintings combined a West Coast embrace of landscape with an almost scientific interest in technical strategies for image making.

With the significance of contemporary artists typically measured by their success on the market, Mr. Parrino, Mr. Taylor and Mr. Goldstein saw others — often their friends — faring much better than they were. Still, they refused to cater to dealers and collectors.

In 1998, for example, Mr. Parrino responded to a Swiss dealer's complaint that he couldn't sell Mr. Parrino's work by sending a fax to Marc-Olivier Wahler, then a curator at the Centre d'Art Neuchatel Switzerland. The fax instructed Mr. Wahler to remove all of his works from the dealer's Geneva commercial gallery.

"Do not worry about damaging anything (damage is good)," it read. "Nothing will be for sale. All will be thrown out after the show." Seeing his unsold works strewn across the floor of the gallery, Mr. Parrino coolly proceeded to cover their surfaces with black enamel and carve them up with an electric saw.

"Steven was extremely anarchic, especially in relation to gallerists," said Jutta Koether, a German-born artist who was a friend and frequent collaborator of Mr. Parrino. "He'd been put through the ringer so much. He was like, 'I don't have to do this if I don't want to.' "

Far less aggressive in his tactics, Mr. Taylor quietly gave up painting in 1984, when he found it hard to pay for paint and canvases. The following year he began incorporating found objects into three-dimensional works. He stubbornly referred to them as "drawings in space" and refused to promote them to dealers.

"Al was not an art businessman at all," said his widow, Debbie, in an interview. "He would have never gone around to David Zwirner and said, 'Would you come to my studio?' And he wouldn't have let me do that while he was living. He wasn't into the audition."

Instead he relied on word-of-mouth support from his friends, among them the painter Cy Twombly, Mrs. Taylor said.

Mr. Goldstein, for his part, abandoned hard-to-sell films and sound recordings for the more lucrative medium of painting in 1979, only to be criticized for his flagrant use of assistants. "Now it's totally commonplace to have technicians doing the nitty-gritty," said the photographer James Welling, a friend of Mr. Goldstein. "But when Jack was doing this, it was considered extreme. People said he didn't make his own paintings."

Although Mr. Goldstein's sales gained momentum in the late 1980s, his gnawingly competitive spirit and addiction to heroin alienated his friends and supporters.

“Jack had a very short temper and made a point of burning bridges,” Mr. Welling said.

Mr. Goldstein dropped out of sight and spent several years living in a trailer in East Los Angeles with no running water or electricity. His career was being resuscitated somewhat in 2003 when he was found hanging from a tree on his parents’ property in San Bernardino, Calif.

After Mr. Parrino, Mr. Taylor and Mr. Goldstein died, admirers of their work assumed responsibility for what the artists had been unwilling — or unable — to do for themselves.

In late 2006 a retrospective of Mr. Parrino’s work organized by the Musée d’Art Moderne et Contemporain in Geneva was en route to the Palais de Tokyo in Paris when Blair Thurman, a friend and an adviser to his estate, called Andisheh Avini at Gagosian Gallery in New York. Mr. Avini was developing programming for a newly opened series of low-ceilinged, fluorescently lighted rooms at Gagosian’s headquarters on Madison Avenue.

“Blair thought that space kind of screamed for Steven’s work,” Mr. Avini recalled, adding that he proposed a Parrino show to Larry Gagosian, who embraced the idea.

Likewise, after several false starts, Mrs. Taylor approached Zwirner & Wirth, sending them a small selection of her husband’s catalogs. The package sat for several months among a stack of similar parcels until the summer of 2006, when a gallery assistant showed it to Ms. Bell.

Ms. Bell scheduled a visit to the artist’s TriBeCa studio. There, she said, Mrs. Taylor pulled out portfolio after portfolio of drawings arranged by year, beginning with 1974-75 and ending with Mr. Taylor’s death in 1999. Ms. Bell arranged for a visit with Mr. Zwirner, who said he was “blown away” by the work.

After devoting a room in its booth at Art Basel Miami in December to Mr. Taylor, Zwirner & Wirth presented a tightly focused show of drawings and three-dimensional pieces made from 1985 to 1990, just after the artist gave up painting, at its Upper East Side gallery.

At the Art Chicago fair in April and most recently at Art Basel in Switzerland, Ms. Bell said, the work sold well. Mr. Taylor's drawings now fetch up to \$20,000, and three-dimensional works range from \$40,000 to \$200,000. "It was a classic rediscovery," Mr. Zwirner said. As for Mr. Goldstein, his paintings now top out at around \$250,000.

With Mitchell-Innes & Nash's support and a planned retrospective of his work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, Mr. Goldstein's place in the contemporary art pantheon is all but secured.

Still, the market's embrace of Mr. Parrino, Mr. Taylor and Mr. Goldstein within a decade of their respective deaths elicits some skepticism. "On the one hand, it's incredibly romantic," the artist Robert Longo said in an interview. "These artists are finally getting their due. On the other hand, it's about a commodity. There's a limited supply."

Comparisons to van Gogh are inevitable. The art dealer Theo van Gogh was not successful at selling his brother Vincent's work, said Joachim Pissarro, director of the Hunter College Art Galleries and a co-curator of "Van Gogh and the Colors of the Night," opening in September at the Museum of Modern Art. Then six months after Vincent's suicide, Theo also died, leaving the unsold trove of van Gogh's artwork to his wife, Johanna.

"Johanna was a very shrewd businesswoman," Mr. Pissarro said. "She knew how to sell a legend. But Vincent was also very, very respected among artists."

"Had van Gogh lived a few years longer, he would have been a millionaire."