

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

AT THE GALLERIES GOLDLESS



The Los Angeles-based conceptual artist Chris Burden is known for topicality. During the Vietnam War, he had a friend shoot him in the arm with a .22-calibre rifle. After Watergate, he bought airtime on local TV and, he says, “became the first artist to make a full public financial disclosure” (net income: a thousand and fifty-four dollars). In keeping with the current economic mood, he



Chris Burden

recently started planning a show about weights and measures and the real value of things. For one of the pieces, he told his art dealer, Larry Gagosian, that he would need a hundred one-kilo bars of pure gold. The gallery looked into renting the gold—for two previous exhibitions of the piece, in museums, it had come on loan from banks—but in the end Gagosian decided to buy it, for around three million dollars, from Stanford Coins & Bullion, in Houston. The gallery wired the money in early February, and, for security reasons, requested that shipment be delayed until just

before the opening. Two weeks later, R. Allen Stanford, the cricket-loving financier who owns the bullion company, was charged by the S.E.C. with an alleged eight-billion-dollar fraud, and all of Stanford's assets were placed in receivership by court order. There is no word yet on when or if Gagosian will get his gold.

The show, "One Ton One Kilo," was scheduled to open at the Beverly Hills branch of Gagosian on the first Saturday in March. That morning, there was a sign taped to the gallery's door: party cancelled, show indefinitely postponed. Burden was inside: a compact, thickset man in his early sixties, wearing a no-nonsense blue button-down, and looking a little stunned. He paced around the base of a 1964 Ford farm truck painted the color of grocery-store pumpkin pie, on which was mounted a crane holding a two-thousand-pound block of cast iron: "One Ton." (Burden lives in Topanga Canyon, and maintains a fleet that includes a fire truck, a forklift, a brush-chipper, and a bulldozer; the Ford was one of his own.) Even he, the master of the high-art gag, was having a hard time coming to terms with what had just happened. "This is such a simple trade," he said. "I have six goats and you have two gold coins. It's five thousand years ago, and I say, 'Can we make a deal?' It's the most traditional, conservative transaction. That it can go wrong is kind of shocking."

Burden climbed a short flight of stairs to a second-floor gallery. In the center of the room stood a glass vitrine on a black pedestal, like the aftermath of a magic trick. The gold was to have been arranged inside, in the form of a low ziggurat, and illuminated with a spotlight. (The room would have been dark.) "The empty case, waiting!" he said, shaking his head.

The idea of working with gold bars first occurred to Burden in the seventies, during another prolonged economic downturn. Back then, he envisaged a sculpture consisting of four gold bars, watched over by a security guard. "I figured most people would think I was putting the guard there to make them *think* it was real when it was fake," he said. "The point was to make people think you were faking when it was actually real gold." Commodities fraud, in reverse.

One of the things that fascinated Burden about gold was its fluctuating value. Case in point: not long after Gagosian struck his deal with Stanford, investors,

panicked by the falling stock market, made a so-called "flight to safety," driving up the price of gold. "I got a call from a curator friend, who ran into Larry," Burden said. "He said, 'Larry loves you! He just made two to three hundred thousand dollars on the gold he bought you.'" (In the weeks since Gagosian had placed the order, the price of gold had risen about ten per cent.) The volatility made pricing the sculpture risky. The gallery settled on five million dollars, but, Burden said, "I told them, 'You should be very careful. If during the exhibition the price of gold doubles, you'll be selling six million dollars' worth of gold for five million dollars. I'll sign up to buy that right away.'"

Burden gazed at the case. "I don't know," he said. "Is it going to be here next week, or the week after, or never?" He mentioned that the golden ziggurat would be surrounded by tiny figures made from paper matches, which he called "a symbol of the transience of human life versus the lasting power of gold." They were being stored in a balsa-wood cake box, which he opened. Some were dancing; others saluted or stood guard with straight-pin swords drawn. One was on its knees, cardboard hands clutching a red match-tip head. Burden held it up. "Mamma mia, right?" he said. "We should put this one in the case."

—Dana Goodyear