

## GAGOSIAN

FINANCIAL TIMES

### Lunch with the FT: Larry Gagosian

*Over swordfish in Mayfair the world's most successful art dealer talks about his humble beginnings and his 'natural feel for selling'*

Jackie Wullschalger



©James Ferguson

How do you get to be the world's most successful art dealer? The steely-eyed, silver-haired 65-year-old who steps discreetly into C London in Mayfair is not giving much away. "I'm a kinda lowbrow guy," Larry Gagosian says, acknowledging the greetings from tables full of international collectors in town for the Frieze art fair as he slips into a corner seat beside me. "I couldn't put it better than Woody Allen does, 'Just give me a good game and a good beer.' I'm just like the next guy."

In black trousers, open-necked shirt and checked jacket, he has certainly tried to look ordinary. Tanned and trim (when at home in New York, he works out in the pool at his Manhattan town house), Gagosian speaks softly, slowly, deliberately, as if to undercut his powerful image.

But to say he is "just like the next guy" is straining the truth. Gagosian is masterminding the careers of blue-chip names such as Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami and Damien Hirst. He owns nine (soon to be 10) galleries round the world. When we meet, he is fresh from an opening at one of his London galleries, Hirst's "Poisons + Remedies" in Davies Street, a Mayfair space that he says "has been a gold mine". He is en route to a party at the other gallery, on Britannia Street near Kings Cross, to celebrate James Turrell, the American conceptualist and experimental sculptor of light and space who has just joined the Gagosian stable. When I congratulate him on his recent, museum-quality Picasso show in the same Britannia Street gallery, talk turns naturally to his pleasure in "building a nice Picasso collection". Collecting for himself, says Gagosian, is "a perk" of the job.

C London, formerly known as Cipriani, is Gagosian's neighbour on Davies Street and a favourite haunt. Without bothering to open the menu, he asks for grilled swordfish – surely appropriate for

a man known as the sharpest operator in the business. I opt for risotto alla primavera. A drink? “No, no, but please go ahead – knock yourself out! You want a vodka? Ha!” He glances at the scribbles in my notebook: “Then you won’t be able to read your handwriting. Which could be a good thing.” We settle on mineral water: sparkling for him, still for me. “Restaurant behaviour is now so standardised, it’s kinda annoying”, he observes. “When I first came to London it was a two-hour lunch and a bottle of wine; in New York’s it’s Diet Coke and back to the office in 20 minutes.” He affects appreciation of the lunch crowd lingering around us but I sense that the New York model better suits this frenetically active man.

In the past week, Gagosian has been in London for the giant Frieze contemporary art fair, then in Paris to receive the Légion d’Honneur – an award he studiously avoids mentioning throughout our lunch – and to inaugurate his ninth gallery, a swankily revamped hôtel particulier close to the Champs Elysées. “There’s room for a gallery like ours there, so we decided to take the plunge. And Paris is catching up with London – don’t you think so?”

The charming sleight that my opinion matters conceals ruthless ambition and business acumen. Gagosian is establishing himself in the French capital ahead of Bernard Arnault’s museum, the Louis Vuitton Foundation for Creation, designed by Frank Gehry, which will transform Paris as a contemporary art centre.

The Paris gallery is part of an expanding empire establishing Gagosian as the art market’s one truly global brand. By next weekend he will be back in New York to open an important Robert Rauschenberg show – he represents the artist’s estate. Next month a Giacometti exhibition will launch his 10th gallery, in Geneva, and he shows Murakami in Rome. A Hong Kong gallery is scheduled for January.

“Yeah, I like to travel, like anyone does,” says Gagosian. “I like to have a reason to visit each city – that’s very satisfying. I go to Rome, I have a reason to be there, not just looking at the sights. Not that the sights aren’t worth looking at but I’m not the sort of person who goes somewhere just because it’s there. I mean, it’s great for people to do that but I don’t do it.”

What he does is enact, in real street level spaces, the abstract idea of 21st-century global culture. “New York used to drive the art world but it’s much more diverse, more global now. One sees wealth in many more different parts of the world, and the big change is electronic information – being able to show images anywhere. Yet you have to reinforce that with bricks and mortar apparently, this business is based on walking in a door and looking at things. Most major galleries have clients round the world; we’ve built all these galleries. It’s a particular approach, I’m not sure it’s necessary but it is fun. Once I started I couldn’t stop.”

He was born in 1945 in Los Angeles, the elder of two siblings, to Armenian immigrant parents, a stockbroker and “a homemaker”, and “had to leave LA to take the next step up – New York was the obvious place to go, so right off the bat I was moving – always moving.”

After an English degree at the University of California Los Angeles, “I started selling posters on the sidewalk”. He acquired them for \$2, stuck them in aluminium frames and resold them at \$15. “I didn’t think it would lead to anything. I didn’t go to museums when I was a kid, it wasn’t that sort of family. It was only when I started to get into the art world that I understood such a profession as art dealer existed.”

Our lunch arrives. My risotto is creamy, soothing and packed with asparagus. Gagosian's swordfish, is accompanied by boiled potatoes and a green salad. He approaches the dish methodically, with minimal interest, and continues: "I wasn't particularly ambitious at college, I had no career path whatsoever. I started from scratch so it always felt like progress." Did he follow any models? "I'm not really a scholar but I read a couple of biographies of [Sir Joseph] Duveen – I find his style kinda inspiring. He was a risk-taker, not afraid to buy a very expensive work of art. He believed in the power of art – that's where the confidence has to be. Art's been around a long time: I can't screw it up too much!"

Duveen was a British art dealer who grew rich in the early 20th century by acting on one idea: that Europe had old art while America had new money. Gagosian opened his first gallery in Los Angeles in 1979 and similarly made a fortune taking the excitement of the east coast art scene – Richard Serra, Frank Stella, Eric Fischl – to west coast collectors newly rich from profits in entertainment, real estate and technology. He also acquired a reputation for turning collectors' houses into extensions of the Gagosian Gallery, brokering deals on the principle that anything is for sale if the price is right.

An early triumph in the mid-1980s was cold-calling the collectors Burton and Emily Tremaine and persuading them to sell their Mondrian, "Victory Boogie-Woogie", to Condé Nast publisher Si Newhouse for \$12m. That sum sounds small beer compared to today's prices, which, Gagosian says, "I would not have anticipated – I don't think anyone would." In 2006, he brokered another famous private sale, from entertainment mogul David Geffen to hedge fund billionaire Steven Cohen, of Willem de Kooning's "Woman III" for \$137m – the second most expensive work of art ever sold.

Gagosian has, he acknowledges, "a natural feel for selling. Innate cleverness is part of my DNA. My judgment isn't always right but I tend to be able to size things up." He was also "born with a good eye – well, I think it is a good eye. I've always been extremely visual, looked at things closely, been captivated. I don't want to say I have any special gift but if you haven't an eye, you won't be a dealer."

Moving to New York in the 1980s, Gagosian caught the attention of Leo Castelli, then America's most influential gallerist, who "became a very, very good friend. He took a liking to me, I think, because I could sell things for him. It annoyed a lot of people, which was part of the idea." Gagosian acquired the nickname "Go go", while Peter Schjeldahl, an art critic for The New Yorker, has described him as being "like a shark or a cat or some other perfectly designed biological mechanism".

Why do people have these reactions to him? "You'd have to ask them! But anyone is susceptible to pangs of envy and competition – it's what makes the world go round. As long as you behave well, there's nothing wrong with being aggressive." He has poached from other dealers – Murakami from Marianne Boesky, Franz West from David Zwirner – but "never from Leo, why would I? It would have been bad manners, and bad business."

Our short lunch is interrupted by a waiter assuming we have finished, but "I'm not through with it yet", Gagosian says of the last shreds of his salad, as if it were a tricky installation. Since Castelli's death in 1999, he sums up, "the art world has become much more a business, for better or worse, through thick and thin – and even the lean times are not that lean!" Has Gagosian effected this transformation? "I haven't changed the way art's sold but I'm the kind of person

that likes to push and keep challenging myself. I haven't reinvented the wheel but by expanding it into a global business, that's a contribution. But the model of art dealing is pretty fixed."

Never before, though, has a dealer swollen an artist's prices simply by anointing him into his stable. British painter Glenn Brown, for example, joined Gagosian in 2004 with a record price of £46,000; now his top price is £1.4m – a 30-fold rise, exceptional in just six years. "Taking an artist at entry point and building that reputation – if you pick well – it's one of the neatest things you can do as a dealer," Gagosian says. And he has just, he mentions, had dinner in New York with the abstract painter Cecily Brown; he talks warmly of her new baby, and also of the fact that "when she started, her big canvases were \$8,000. Now they're – more expensive." (One fetched \$1.1m at Sotheby's in May.)

Is his Midas touch so infallible that things get dull? "If everything's blue-chip, it might make good business sense but it becomes kinda sterile. But you try to show the most interesting, innovative artists – that's your judgment, your taste – it's the most crucial decision a dealer has to make."

Like other great dealers – Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler with Picasso or Castelli with Jasper Johns – Gagosian will be remembered for facilitating certain great careers: particularly Richard Serra, with whom he has worked since 1982 – "I built my gallery in Chelsea with Richard in mind, to keep him excited and engaged, I bought the building because his work demanded it" – and Cy Twombly. "Yeah, I push him. I'm sure he sort of groaned when he heard I was opening in Paris," says Gagosian, who has launched each European venue, including Paris, with a Twombly show. "One of the greatest joys of my life has been working with Cy. It's an awesome career."

Gagosian has no family and it is noticeable that his most shimmering shows this year – Picasso in London, Monet in New York – have been historical. "I don't want a premature retrospective", he says, but he is displaying part of his own collection for the first time this autumn, in Abu Dhabi. He turns down dessert and tells me, "I don't do coffee", but, as I request the bill, he asks, "Do you do this sort of thing often? I don't."

He rarely gives interviews and I have been wondering why he agreed to this one. Is it competitive drive? Hauser & Wirth, his nearest rival, has just opened spectacular premises in Savile Row and Gagosian is aware that he "needs a bigger space, in the centre", to reaffirm his London presence. His final speech, though, delivered in a fluent rush, suggests something deeper: at 65, this fearsomely efficient selling machine is also concerned with the longer view, the legacy.

"T S Eliot said that every new piece of literature alters what's been written before, and you can adapt that to art," he says. "Taste changes, time will tell. But you can't freak out about it and you can't be paralysed because you can't always hit the bull's-eye when it comes to art history. That shouldn't stop you taking your shot. Art dealers feel they have to obfuscate the mercantile part of their profession but let's not kid ourselves – it's a business. Artists have families and children and like anyone else they want to live decently – sometimes very decently. We use our best judgment but we just don't know: great art has lasting value, it doesn't go away. And, look, I could have been selling insurance – I mean no disrespect to that profession – but anyone doing what I do has to feel really fortunate. It's a wonderful world, the best."