

GAGOSIAN

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**‘I like the way things look.’ The world according to Larry Gagosian**  
*The super-dealer and gallerist talks money, taste and power*

Robert Armstrong



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Larry Gagosian, the most important art dealer in the world, speaks the language of business first, and with assurance. I ask him, in the library of his Upper East Side mansion, what has his professional attention these days. “All the same things that have for the past 40 years: just succeeding,” he says. “Competing hard. Coming up with new ideas, new situations to benefit my artists. It’s a constant, very consuming job. Anybody who wants to be an art dealer and be any good – it takes a lot of time, a lot of work.” Much of Gagosian’s conversation has this tone. Competition, success, hard work, energy, opportunity, motion. A very large Andy Warhol painting of Elvis, dressed as a cowboy and pointing a pistol at the viewer, looks down on us.

Gagosian speaks quietly; he has a bad cold (“I feel like shit” is the first sentence he says to me after we shake hands). Now 76, he is wearing a dark long-sleeved polo shirt, cords and blue alligator loafers. He moves calmly and deliberately, but there is something coiled about him. When his gaze falls on you, you feel it a little.

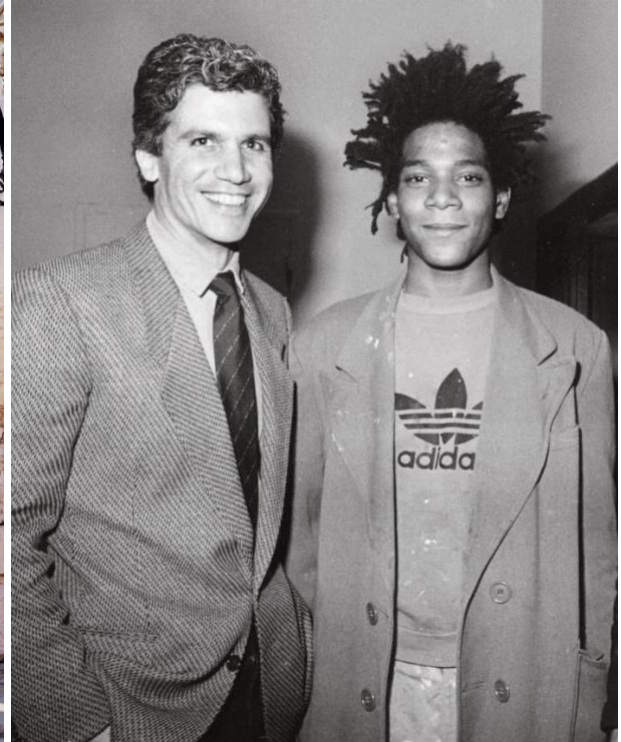


*Larry Gagosian with Untitled, 2005, by Cy Twombly © Tyler Mitchell. © Cy Twombly Foundation, courtesy of Gagosian*

When asked to speak the language of painting, he is more careful. What draws him to Cy Twombly’s work, for instance? The late American artist is just one of the many greats he has represented, including Anselm Kiefer, Damien Hirst, Helen Frankenthaler, Ed Ruscha and Donald Judd, plus the estates of Picasso, Warhol and de Kooning. He thinks a little. “[MoMA curator] Kirk Varnedoe said that Cy Twombly challenged Jackson Pollock with a pencil. What I like about the art is the confidence, the power, the freshness of it. There was no Twombly before Twombly.” Confidence, power, innovation. It makes sense that these qualities would appeal to a man who has been at the centre of the transformation of the art world since the Reagan years. Incredible wealth has accumulated among the global elite over those decades, and Gagosian has been right there, funnelling it into contemporary art and upending his profession along the way. Before Gagosian, art dealing had a largely old-world flavour and its insiders hewed to an old-money posture, whatever their real beginnings. Gagosian started out selling posters on the street in Los Angeles.



*From left: Larry Gagosian, Richard Serra and Cy Twombly  
© Anders Overgaard/Trunk Archive*



*Gagosian with Jean-Michel Basquiat  
© Courtesy Gagosian*

I mention that when people talk about him, the word “aggressive” tends to come up. Art-world people joke, or rather half-joke, that he has sold paintings before their owners knew they were for sale. “It’s sort of a word that has slightly unpleasant connotations,” he says, “but I think if you are not aggressive in business you are not going to go very far. It’s the only way I can function. Aggressive doesn’t mean you behave as a monster. It means you are an opportunist, forward-looking. Moving forward, moving forward – that’s my idea of aggressive.” And the pretensions of gentility that once characterised the business? “I’ve eliminated all those,” he says with a laugh.

No one suggests that Gagosian is vulgar, or doubts the quality of his eye. “He has the most incredible visual memory I have ever come across,” says Nicholas Serota, director of the Tate for 29 years. “He can tell you what wall a painting was hanging on in a home 30 years after seeing it there.” It’s not just recollection; it’s recognition. The British painter Jenny Saville, who shows with Gagosian, says that in addition to his feel for the market, he has defined tastes of his own. “He likes big, structural forms. He has an eye for an image that is very anchored, with a strong form. He likes ambitious work.” The fusion of that eye with business instincts “sets him apart”, says Saville. “He has a desire for money and a desire for art in equal measure.” An LA native, Gagosian had no early inclination towards his profession. His middle-class family did not own pictures. He did not study art at UCLA, where he majored in English and was on the swim team. His first office job was at the William Morris talent agency, where he worked as

Hollywood mogul Michael Ovitz's secretary. He was fired, which led to a job parking cars, then the posters on the sidewalk. But he was always visual. "The first thing, looking back, [was] when I was a kid going to camp," he told me. "One of the guys in the bunk – I don't know if I was nine or 10 – he took his clothes out of his duffel bag and I looked at the pants and I thought they were just so beautiful and attractive. I didn't have clothes like that. So I started looking at things aesthetically. That didn't lead to me being an art dealer, but I am a very visual person, whether it's a beautiful woman or a beautiful painting. I like the way things look."



*Gagosian at home with Torero, 1970, by Pablo Picasso © Tyler Mitchell. © Succession Picasso/DACS, London 2022*

Gagosian has had a front-row seat to the explosion of extreme wealth. Are his rich clients different now than in the '90s? "More zeros. There's rich and then there's rich." While the new wealth has broadened and deepened the market, it creates complications, too. "People who own great works, say you offer \$200mn, \$300mn, whatever the number is – we are talking about astronomical numbers – the person says, 'I don't really need the money.' It's hard to believe. My feeling is when they sell something like that they feel poorer, not richer. So it's hard. If there's a death, a bad divorce, a business disaster, then things become available, but otherwise people say, 'I don't care how much you offer me. I'd rather have the art than the money.' And thank God some people think that way."



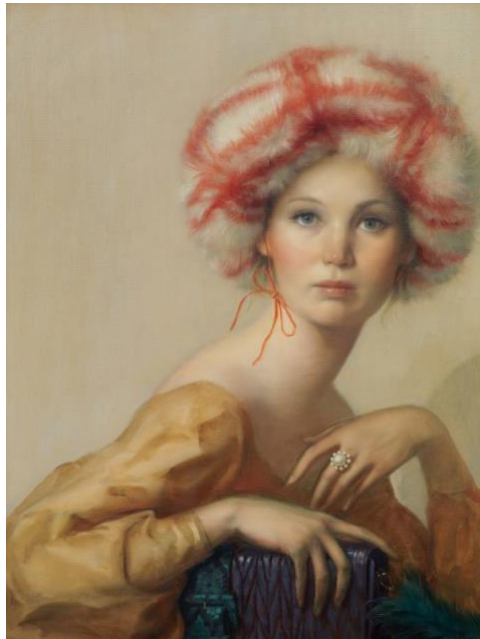
*The new Gagosian gallery in Paris © Thomas Lannes, courtesy of Gagosian*



*Helen Frankenthaler on show at Gagosian Paris © 2022 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc./ARS. Photograph: Thomas Lannes, courtesy of Gagosian*

It's hard to imagine a better example of big art meeting big money than Gagosian's house. Bought 11 years ago for \$36.5mn, it has a classic limestone façade but the interior has been completely rebuilt; it ascends around an airy central staircase of black metal. The art is staggering. Across the dining room from an immense Brice Marden Cold Mountain painting is Picasso's 1921 portrait of his first wife Olga. In the living room, a vast Twombly from the Bacchus series faces a beautiful Mondrian and an Ed Ruscha of a gas station on fire; between them on a table sits a wildly obscene Jeff Koons glass sculpture. Half under the table, almost an

afterthought, sits a Warhol Brillo box. Prince, Richter, Lichtenstein, on and on it goes. Almost every piece is instantly recognisable, iconic. There is nothing pre-20th century. It is fantastically intimidating. After ascending the staircase to the main floor, you see a lush John Currin portrait of a young, pink-cheeked woman in a red-and-white fur hat. The subject looks familiar. “It’s Jennifer Lawrence,” says Gagosian. “She sat for it. We offered it to her. John says, you know, ‘Jennifer likes the painting, shall we sell it to her?’ And I say, ‘Of course.’ And we gave her a chance to buy it at a very special price, because at that point in time she was not married to an art dealer [Cooke Maroney]. But she passed, or her business manager passed, or whatever. And then she came to my house for a dinner party, and she wanted to buy the painting. I said, ‘Sorry Jennifer, I love you, but that ship has sailed.’”



*Untitled, 2017, by John Currin – Gagosian’s portrait of Jennifer Lawrence © John Currin. Photograph: Rob McKeever, courtesy of Gagosian*

Gagosian is credited with two innovations in the way contemporary art is sold. The first is the move beyond the model of small- to mid-sized shows of a living artist’s most recent work. Gagosian has acquired big, beautifully located gallery spaces that have allowed him to present ambitious, museum-type exhibitions either of multiple artists or highlighting neglected aspects of a dead artist’s work – borrowing most of the pieces from museums or collectors and mixing in a few that are for sale. The accompanying scholarship and publications are first-rate. “Other people might have said, ‘Will the museums mind?’ But because Larry didn’t know it was right or wrong, he just did it,” Saville says. “He has had several exhibitions where there was no market [for the work] before. Late Picasso, late de Kooning... Larry took it and built a show and the work was reassessed.” He was also the first major gallerist to latch onto globalisation, building a brand that spans the world. Gagosian has added two new spaces in just the past few months, bringing the total to 19 (six in New York; three in London; three in Paris; three in Switzerland;

Rome, Athens, Hong Kong). He represents close to 100 artists. His competitors have followed. It is no exaggeration to say that the gallery world consists of a handful of global dealers with revenues in the hundreds of millions – Gagosian, Hauser & Wirth, Zwirner – with everyone a significant distance behind. Gagosian understood that “you have to be a multinational operation with a strong local basis”, says Max Hollein, who leads New York’s Metropolitan museum. That international reach is “clearly positive”, he says, not least for the artists. “Gagosian created that model... It is not a flawless system, but it changed how the system operated.”



*Gagosian Quarterly (summer 2021)*



*More issues of Gagosian Quarterly*

Has the system that Gagosian led been good for artists and art lovers? Saville and Serota credit him with creating spaces that inspire artists to create ambitious work. Others have doubts. One well-known art professional – who ranks the quality of Gagosian’s operation as “a level above everyone else” – told me that the mega-gallery system is making starting a smaller gallery economically futile. “It used to be [that] someone would open a gallery with a group of young artists, and the artists would grow up and the gallery would grow up... Now what happens is that when an artist hits \$1mn for a work, or even \$100,000 or \$200,000, one of the big galleries comes and says, ‘We have hotels, we have private jets, come to a party.’ And the artist leaves. As a career path, why would you start a gallery? What’s the point? Immediately when you get profitable you are going to be unprofitable again.” Others argue that the big gallery system hypes artists of questionable talent to meet bottomless demand for high-priced art. The critic Jerry Saltz wrote this assessment: “Something happens to people when they sign with the megas. Too often, the artists are brought in at mid-career, and – like 34-year-olds signed by the Yankees – they are poised for a decline. Every show of living artists in these galleries is ushered in like a career retrospective, a quasi-coronation, with everything often already sold or spoken for. There’s no space for debate about the merits. Many of these shows are too big by half, filled with dross. The artist is a brand, and the brand supersedes the art.” The artists most often linked with commercial “dross” are Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, but they are not alone. However, business is business – and there is no question that Gagosian and his peers put on great shows, too.



*Gagosian in front of Nuba, 1964, by Gerhard Richter © Tyler Mitchell. © Gerhard Richter 2022 (28012022)*

Gagosian himself told me that the biggest shift since he began is instant transmission of images over the internet. It was good for his dealing. “It created momentum, velocity, more transactions.” At the same time, the internet “gives things less of a shelf life sometimes. Because you get image saturation, or artist saturation. I think one could suggest that images get exhausted faster, artists get exhausted faster.” He is perceptibly unenthusiastic about NFTs, reproducible images that have become the art itself. “The only thing anyone wants to talk about is NFTs. I’m not an expert on it, but I pay attention.” He misses the days when the art world was less bureaucratic, with more scope for entrepreneurial improvisation. “I was Cy Twombly’s dealer for, god knows, 30 years, and it was more of a handshake business with artists. There are a lot of artists who still function that way but now the money has gotten bigger. Sometimes it feels you are getting so bogged down with contracts. The first show I had with Twombly I was so excited to be working with him. I said, ‘Cy, I have to ask you a question: what about giving a discount to an important collector or a museum?’ His answer was memorable: ‘Ten per cent, 20 per cent, 30 per cent – just sell it, Larry.’ He was being facetious. It’s kind of like he was telling me, I’ll make the art – you price it, you sell it.” Does he offer his artists guidance? “It’s easier to praise the artist than to fault their recent work – sometimes those are awkward conversations. It’s difficult now. I think those conversations were easier in the past because the important artists have a lot of power. I know instances where a dealer has gone to an artist’s studio and been kind



of lukewarm and the artist changes galleries.” The shift is “not a good thing”, he says. He tells the story of how Picasso’s art dealer in the early 20th century, Paul Rosenberg, was preparing for Picasso’s first show in New York. Picasso sent him recent paintings to include. “Rosenberg sends him a message: ‘Pablo, I’m sorry, the paintings aren’t good enough.’ Can you imagine a dealer rejecting a show of Picasso’s?”



*Gagosian at his Upper East Side apartment. On the walls are (from left) Femme Endormie, 1935, by Pablo Picasso, Triple Elvis, 1963, by Andy Warhol and Femme Accoudée, 1921, by Pablo Picasso © Tyler Mitchell. © Succession Picasso/DACS, London 2022 (2). © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./DACs, London 2022*

“So what did Picasso do? He didn’t say, ‘Fuck you, Paul.’ He painted an entirely new show. Almost every one of those paintings is in a major museum. The most important artist in the world, and he says, ‘This is New York, man! This is going to be the fucking shit! You gotta dig deep!’ “It just shows you the change now. You walk into an artist’s studio, maybe it’s really not good work, and it’s ‘Oh, I love what you are doing.’” Gagosian’s own tastes may run to the iconic, but the gallery’s range is more protean. Social Works, a wide-ranging show featuring 12 black artists at one of the New York spaces, is a good example. The curator, 33-year-old Antwaun Sargent, says, “The show was a risk. The artists were mostly young, the vast majority had not shown with us before, and not shown widely anywhere.” And he’s clearly looking towards the future.

Gagosian’s restlessness serves a purpose. A gallery that did not move forward – in Gagosian’s phrase – would not outlast its founder and sole investor. “I think about the idea of creating a

legacy business, that the gallery could exist beyond me, without me,” he says. In recent years he has hired a lot of high-powered people with leadership potential, such as Laura Paulson, the former chair of 20th-century art at Christie’s who now runs Gagosian Art Advisory, and her husband, Gagosian chief operating officer Andrew Fabricant. But Gagosian offers no clues about the specifics, or about the next expansion of the business. “I got plans. I’m not cagey, I just don’t like to talk about things until they are fully ripe,” he says. “I think secrecy is important in business.”