

Dorsey Waxter: Why Art Galleries Matter

I hear a lot of complaining about the relentless calendar of events in the art world. Between art fairs, auctions, and biennials, there are too many places that we should be going to see and/or buy art. As we become fatigued both mentally and physically, we ask ourselves more and more often whether a trip was worth the effort. Here is a novel suggestion: Travel less and go to your local galleries more.

Galleries are the starting point for the activities that drive so many other entities: art fairs, auctions, art advisories, e-commerce sites, and even museums. In the global art world that we are all trying to navigate, galleries and the dealers who own and run them are more essential than ever.

Galleries serve a purpose that is unique in the art world. Art dealers are most often the ones who discover and nurture new talent. A dealer who shows an artist is making a leap of faith based on intuition that the artist's work is relevant to the current discourse and that, possibly, it can be sold. There are no guarantees. Both the artist and the dealer take a huge chance on each other while other sales venues build their businesses on established reputations.

For the artists that they exhibit, a gallery is the springboard into the world. Artists rely on the gallery to support them in ways that can be profound, such as helping them finance a studio or projects that

would otherwise be beyond their reach. The gallery is often like family, seeing artists through times of creative abundance and inspirational drought.

For collectors both new and established, galleries offer myriad opportunities to look, talk, compare, and absorb. Anyone interested in learning about or collecting art can partake of gallery exhibitions, which are essential to the process of growing as a connoisseur. A collector cannot build his knowledge by looking at a computer screen; it happens when he or she is in front of an artwork, preferably in conversation with an expert. Often the most lasting opinions are formed through discourse with dealers who—due to their long-term relationships with artists—frequently know more about the works they are showing than curators, auction experts, critics, or advisers.

Because their careers are built on such long-term commitments, dealers are custodians not only of art markets but also of artistic



legacies. It would be hard to conceive of a catalogue raisonné without the wealth of information provided by a gallery's archives, which is the repository of such information as when a work was exhibited, to whom it was sold or resold, or who wrote about it. Art dealers and their galleries provide useful services on their artists' behalf to collectors, curators, and auction house specialists.

I have tried to imagine a world where there were no

art dealers and galleries and what that would be like. Fortunately I cannot. All sectors of the art world are tied to one another, but it seems to me that galleries matter the most. Their impact on artists and their influence in the arts community is irreplaceable. They are where the excitement really begins. ▣

Dorsey Waxter is president of the Art Dealers Association of America.