

ARTS

When 'less is more' yields rewards

Art dealer Pilar Ordovas, whose London gallery opened 10 years ago, is an unusual figure in a fast-moving world. She talks to Melanie Gerlis

"Less is more" is not a common strategy in an art world of far-flung gallery outposts and ever-rising prices. But despite a fast-moving, maverick market, London dealer Pilar Ordovas, who marks a decade in business this year, has hewed to that principle – something that chimes well in this post-pandemic period.

Permanent staff across Ordovas on Savile Row in London and a small New York gallery on Madison Avenue number just eight; she averages between three and four exhibitions a year across both cities and eschews art fairs. Ordovas, former deputy chair of postwar and contemporary art in Europe at Christie's, says she set out "not to mirror what is now opposite us" – the multi-venue, branded behemoth Hauser & Wirth, also on Savile Row. "I want the person whose name is on the door to be in the gallery."

Even more unusually, unlike at most commercial galleries, the art on show at Ordovas is rarely available to buy. So how does the elegant, charming 49-year-old keep her show on the road? "There are no hard and fast rules, but when we have a show, we sometimes have other works for sale that are not on view because they could water down the exhibition context. These are available, privately and discreetly," she says.

For example, Ordovas says that she sold a large triptych by Francis Bacon off the back of her first London show, even though it had not been on public display. She won't reveal the price, but she had helped sell such works through Christie's for tens of millions of pounds.

"For me, whether I am selling something at a low or high price, it takes the same energy. Why make thousands of



sales when you could make five?" she says.

Her approach has led to some high-calibre exhibitions since 2011. Her opening show, launched to great acclaim, combined self-portraits by Bacon and Rembrandt. Subsequent exhibitions have included mobile

Clockwise from main: Pilar Ordovas; her New York show 'Bacon's Women', 2018-19; Richard Serra drawings on show at her London gallery

© The Estate of Francis Bacon, DACS 2021; Richard Serra/ARS, NY and DACS, London 2021

sculptures made by Alexander Calder in India and Peggy Guggenheim and London, a celebration of the art patron's overlooked gallery in the UK. Bacon was also a hit at Ordovas's space in New York in 2018, with an exhibition dedicated to the women in his seemingly male-dominated life.

Her shows fall broadly into two overlapping categories: either unearthing historical connections or highlighting lesser-known aspects of living artists. Her current show, of ink and silica drawings by the American artist Richard Serra, best known for his monumental steel sculptures, falls squarely into the latter. Called the *Orchard Street* drawings, their title refers to the Long Island road where the artist lives and made these works.

Ordovas feels these are "so special because they are more intimate than his earlier drawings and are private works that the artist produced in the studio without the presence or assistance of anyone else". And this time around, they are for sale.

Exploring the unknown seems to have been ingrained in the young Ordovas, who grew up in Madrid and was captivated by ancient Egypt. "I wanted to be the first female Indiana Jones," she says. Her research-based approach took her instead to Edinburgh university, where she earned a PhD on military orders of the Crusades, before starting an internship at Christie's.

It made sense to her to leave the auction world in 2009, during the financial crisis, moving into private sales at



Gagosian: "Lehman [Brothers] went under and it was such a low point. Something had happened that you couldn't control, the world changed. It was grueling. How could I tell my [auction] clients that it was the right time to sell publicly?" The move taught her about the care taken over preparing exhibition catalogues and publications, but also "gave me the confidence to go out on my own".

Ordovas's thirst for detail has earned her praise from high places. "Pilar stands out because she values traditional connoisseurship and scholarship so highly," says Nicholas Serota, chair of Arts Council England, highlighting the Peggy Guggenheim exhibition as a favourite. He refers to her shows as "museum quality", which can be an overused description in the art world but, when it comes from someone who was director of Tate between 1998 and 2017, carries authority.

If Ordovas has any regrets in her 10 years of business, it is that she has not shown as much work by female artists as she would like. It is, in some ways, part of the challenge of the secondary market for 20th-century art, where there are fewer such works available. But she is partly making up for it through her trustee role at the Valerie Beston Artists' Trust. An annual prize

gives financial support, a studio and an exhibition at Ordovas gallery for a Royal College of Art student, with sale proceeds going to the artist. Since the prize began in 2007, nine of the 15 winners have been women, Ordovas notes, including Caroline Walker, now represented by Stephen Friedman gallery.

Ordovas is not overly concerned about selling to the person in front of her: "I want to know you, not just sell to you and say goodbye. Perhaps you will buy from me one day, or perhaps your children will. That idea gives me the most satisfaction."

The next generation seems more on her mind these days, having recently married and had her first child, a daughter called Paloma, who delights followers of Ordovas's Instagram feed. Her own position as the first child of five was instrumental to her education in art, she says: "Going to exhibitions was a way to have time alone with my father, to have his attention." His job as a pilot for Iberia meant that she could do so around the world.

With no pun intended, she says she wants her daughter to know that "the sky's the limit". She will be learning from a high-flyer.

'Richard Serra Drawings' runs at Ordovas London to December 17, ordovasart.com



Installation view of 'Calder in India' at Ordovas, London, 2012 © 2021 Calder Foundation, New York/DACS, London

Heavyweight digs deeper and darker

PODCASTS

Fiona Sturges



The *Heavyweight* podcast, from Gimlet Media, is a series I go back to time and time again. There is warmth and humanity in its stories about other people's lives, even if those stories turn out to be sad. I've lost count of the times I've heard "Gregor" (all the episodes are named after the people at the centre of them), about a man who lent a box set of CDs to his friend, Moby, who then sampled the tracks on them and made a multimillion-selling album called *Play*. In the episode, Gregor wants his CDs back along with a glimpse of the life he could have had.

Then there's Rob, who recalls breaking his arm when he was a child and is baffled when his family says it never happened; Rose, who was kicked out of her college sorority and, a decade later, wants to know why; and Brandon, a one-time school misfit who is still wondering why he was asked to the prom by one of the most popular girls in his class. Was it pity, or a dare?

Heavyweight is, then, a podcast about turning points, finding answers to enduring questions and reckoning with the past. It is hosted by Jonathan Goldstein, who facilitates these reckonings, acts as intermediary and asks the questions that those at the centre of the story can't bring themselves to ask. Throughout all this, Goldstein manages to find laughter amid the melancholy, invariably at his own expense, all the while displaying remarkable empathy towards his subjects and finding profundity in their predicaments.



Jonathan Goldstein hosts the 'Heavyweight' podcast

But the past few episodes have brought a change in rhythm and gone to places you suspect even Goldstein couldn't have imagined. "Justine" hears from a daughter whose father told her wild stories about hanging out with rock stars and robbing banks when she was small; now, as an adult, she wants to know if he was telling tall tales. Goldstein goes through the stories one by one, testing their veracity and, while some appear to be true, others do not.

But then Justine comes back with another long-buried memory of her father telling her that her brother wasn't his biological son and swearing her to secrecy. I won't spoil what comes next, except to say that Stephen, Justine's brother, becomes the subject of a companion episode that actually made me weep.

And then there's the latest story concerning Barbara, who died recently and whose obituary told of a life that an old friend of hers didn't recognise. Becky, who spent the best summer of her life with Barbara 50 years ago, wants to know the real story of her friend's life. Over two episodes, Goldstein unearths a tale so remarkable, involving childhood abandonment and murder, that I was compelled to listen twice to make sure I didn't miss anything. Trust me when I say you should do the same.

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