



The dealer who sells Freud and Bacon for eye-watering prices is opening her own gallery in Savile Row. Pilar Ordovas tells **Bel Trew** why now

**P**ILAR ORDOVAS is something of a legend within the secret circle of the high-end art world. She was behind the world record-breaking sale of Lucian Freud's Benefits Supervisor Sleeping, which went for an eye-watering \$33 million (£21 million) in 2008. She also brought to auction Francis Bacon's Triptych 1974-1977, which sold for £26 million, making it the most expensive work of art ever sold at Christie's in London, where, as one of its most successful dealers, Ordovas was responsible for nine out of 10 of the top sales.

From the auction house she went on to manage Larry Gagosian's gallery in London. But after two years, much to the bemusement of the international art magnate, Ordovas, 38, quit.

Fast-forward to last month and the experienced researcher and curator announced that she was going solo, raising huge expectations, with her own gallery, Ordovas. "I know where the art is," she says meaningfully.

This is no mean feat for a woman working in a man's world. The majority of art galleries are still owned or run by men and the auction houses come across as stuffy old boys' clubs. "Yes, I've felt it, I've entered boardrooms where I have been the only woman present," Ordovas says. "Maybe some traditional female traits help, like being a good listener, but you don't want to be known because of your gender." Far from trying to match their masculinity,

Ordovas is warm, feminine and driven. She looks like a Spanish Rebecca Hall.

Ordovas has seen the contemporary market change dramatically since she started in the warehouses of Christie's in 1996, fresh from university in her native Madrid and Edinburgh. "I was told that in the Seventies when a letter arrived with a foreign stamp, it would be chucked in the bin unopened. The mentality was British-centric," Ordovas explains. "It wasn't until 2000 that things started to change. One of the biggest transformations has been due to the globalisation of the industry."

With new players such as Abu Dhabi and Hong Kong pouring millions into art purchases, festivals and education, the geographical focus has shifted, helping nudge London into the limelight. "We shouldn't underestimate America," Ordovas says, "but with the art world expanding, it's a lot easier to go through London." It's funny that a seven-hour flight difference gives us the artistic edge over New York.

"The market became truly interna-

**'With my gallery I want collectors to feel like they're developing an eye for what they really love'**

ional," she continues, now talking about being director of post-war and contemporary art at Christie's. "I was on a plane almost every day of the week. I once had to fly to Australia for the afternoon to see a painting ... I'd go to Hong Kong for the day."

As part of the job, Ordovas has unique access to artists and recently visited the Louvre with the English painter Jenny Saville ("I got to see Monet through her eyes").

Ordovas also managed Valerie Beston's estate after her death in 2005. "Miss B", the immensely private director of the Marlborough Gallery and beloved of Francis Bacon, left an extraordinary collection. "Her flat was full of paintings nobody knew about." One of the discoveries Ordovas made was an unknown self-portrait Francis Bacon had given to Beston in 1969. It sold for £5.2 million.

"Miss Beston had touched many artists. I wrote to Frank Auerbach informing him which of his paintings she had. One of them, Frank said, was the only painting he sold in that particular show and his son had just been born. He was penniless. It was really important that she had supported him." Auerbach also told Ordovas how Miss Beston had sent him paints, because "when she asked him why he always painted in dark

colours, he explained he couldn't afford brighter paints".

This personal contact is what tempted Ordovas away from the furious schedule of the auction house. "You'd have a month to put together an auction catalogue and an exhibition; it becomes mechanical. When I put together the Crossing the Channel exhibition for the Gagosian I dedicated three months to the research. It was great to get my teeth into that."

Ordovas talks most warmly about her biggest passion: the artwork of Lucian Freud. "I've got to know Lucian personally over many years. I made it my mission to learn as much as I could about his work. If anyone was going to sell his paintings, it would be me."

Visiting artists in their studios – she recently visited Jeff Koons preparing for an exhibition – is another "magical" aspect of her work. "Because of the sheer scale of Koons's projects his studio is immense. There were over 50 people working there in different designated areas." A fully functioning creative fac-

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tory, Koons's set-up is a far cry from Freud's, whose "studio is filled with paints and canvases and he sits in the middle on his own".

The Ordovas gallery is her baby, although she is hoping her English husband, Nicholas, who works in the City, will help her with the financial side. She chose Savile Row over the industry's traditional home of Cork Street. "There has been a drive to move out of the West End. [But] you need to make things more accessible and more convenient," says Ordovas, who lives in Battersea. "Savile Row with Sadie Coles's HQ, New Burlington and Hauser & Wirth, is becoming the centre of the arts."

She aims to set Ordovas apart by focusing on historical exhibitions and making new connections between existing artists, as well as providing one-on-one client services. "At an auction house at any one time you'd have 200 works and 500 collectors. With the gallery I want collectors to feel like they're developing an eye for what they really love. I want to give personal access."

Ordovas, which opens in October for the peak autumn season, is opposite Hauser & Wirth. I wonder, with her expertise and contacts, if the Swiss art house is nervous? "Competition is good," she says. Perhaps she has secured a killer opening exhibition? "That's a secret," she says, smiling. "You'll just have to wait and see."