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New Kids on the Block

By Dan Duray

RECYCLE GROUP AT RICHARD TAITTINGER GALLERY



Richard Taittinger's gallery at Stanton and Ludlow opened in this past spring, and while it may be the newest on the Lower East Side, its owner is already an expert at knowing how to sell better than many dealers who have been in the business longer. Within 10 minutes Taittinger, tall and with a boyish face that matches his enthusiasm, had provided a resume for each of the artists in the group show, listed their upcoming shows and given a critique of the work. "Good questions," he concludes in his thick French accent, before Théo Mercier's *Oeufs de Paques* (2015), a piece that features an Easter Island monolith emerging from an egg (the title is a pun: "Easter Eggs"). "It's about our history,

civilization, where we are from.”

He continued through the space, which was renovated by the trendy Studio MDA architecture firm and features 20-foot ceilings rare for the neighborhood. And his enthusiasm for Alexander Ponomarev, a Ukrainian artist and former Soviet submarine engineer who draws on Cyrillic navigation charts and represented Russia in the 2007 Venice Biennale, is even less restrained. “This is a museum piece,” he said of the three-panel work, aghast. “Can you believe you could only have it for \$50,000?”

Taittinger comes from a family of vintners, which is so unrelated to what he does now that he doesn’t like to dwell on it. “There’s a family background, in the bubbles,” he said later around the corner, at the kind of coffee shop where young people with fake jobs take unimportant meetings, the clear signifier of a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood. En route Taittinger pointed out that his new space is just across from the new Lower East Side Soho House, and around the corner from Dirty French.

Taittinger has signed a 15-year lease, and the trendiness of the neighborhood has more benefits than just coffee. His business model relies on promoting younger artists, like Mercier, who used to work in Matthew Barney’s studio, and the Recycle Group, a duo out of Russia whose art was being installed when we first met at the gallery. (He also enjoys being a patron of such work, and recently joined the board of Brooklyn-based Residency Unlimited.)

But there’s also good business to be done in artists like Ponomarev, whom the art world defines as “midcareer”, having had a lot of attention early on but then dropping off the map slightly (no pun intended).

“Artists like that, exhibited on the Lower East Side, they get more attention than they would in Chelsea,” he said. Moreover, he loves the neighborhood, with the gallery ecosystem that’s cropped up there, and the people streaming into the streets on Sunday afternoons: “Sunday afternoons belong to us.” He thinks the New Museum is probably his favorite institution in New York, and shows “the most dynamic artists today asking the right questions.”

“This is the future,” he added.

Taittinger’s first experience with the art world, he said, would have been in the 1980s, his mother taking him to an Andy Warhol show at the Sonnabend Gallery in Paris.

He counts Ileana Sonnabend’s onetime husband, Leo Castelli, as a model for how to succeed in the art world: by always putting your artists first, and making sure their work makes its way to the right collections. In some ways, in the modern art world, opening a gallery is actually a revolutionary proposition: so much art these days is sold via JPEG or at art fairs. Taittinger, who has worked as a gallery-less art advisor, felt it was important to have a physical space, however, in part from this Castelli impulse to promote the artist. “I want to show museum-quality works in museum-quality conditions,” he said.

At age 27 he met Simon de Pury, former head of Phillips auction house, at a film festival and asked him for a job in the States. He'd worked for the family, in "the bubbles" until then, but felt the call of art. De Pury reportedly told him he could wait for a job to open, but Taittinger couldn't wait and moved to New York right away, to an area not far from his new gallery, in 2007, a time when the area was fairly rowdy.

For Taittinger, who'd wanted to live in New York since he first flew here for summer camp in Maine (not a cherished experience for someone who spoke no English), it was a dream come true, but he was mainly there to work.

"It's like the American dream," Taittinger said. "I started at the bottom of the ladder at Phillips. I was a 27-year-old intern!"

From there he worked at Almine Rech and the Cueto Project gallery in Chelsea, which was how he came to know Ponomarev, and worked with the Bruce High Quality Foundation, whose work he collects and loves. In 2010 he made his way on his own, to an advisory position that blended his love of collecting with his knowledge of the market.

He saw his own reinvention, in art and in New York, as being no so different from his great-grandfather's following the Franco-Prussian war in 1870. In his telling, Lorraine became German and anyone who wanted to stay French had to leave. Richard's great-grandfather did, and it worked out for him - the Champagne and the hotels following all that.

His reinvention has been a social success as well, and he and his wife, Elodie, are clearly popular. The two met through mutual friends who had tried to set them up several times before they succeeded. The two finally had dinner in Paris and ended up, Taittinger said, "a party of three at 2 a.m.. me, her and the cleaning lady, who wanted to close the restaurant."

A few days later at an opening for the Recycle Group, Taittinger is clad in black jeans and blazer with a gingham pocket square.

The show marked a New York debut for the group, comprised of Andrey Blokhin and Georgy Kuznetsov, and served as a good introduction to their work, with the sculptures of wire mesh and rubber. Many drew on classical, Christian and Renaissance imagery.

Taittinger lectured to a potential buyer about a series of busts that had, bursting through their shoulder blades, the logos for Skype, Vimeo and Facebook. Not enough critics, he was saying, had seen the art history parallels.

"I look at this and I see *Les Bourgeois de Calais*, because I always used to love to go to the Rodin Museum in Paris," he said. It was important in considering the pieces, too, he said, not to underrate the influence of Vkhutemas, the lesser known Russian offshoot of Bauhaus.

The most attention-grabbing piece was a life-sized mesh man in a toga, mounted on an iRobot vacuum cleaner, bumping against the walls and roaming a quarter of the gallery with an iPad-shaped object in his hands, like Moses searching for a signal.

“It’s rather aggressive,” said Blokhin, who’d crouched several times at the barrier of the statue’s area, to tape it down because it was coming loose. “It’s like a little pet!”

Blokhin and Kuznetsov had met Taittinger at the last Moscow Biennale, and what they liked most about him was hard to say: he was exactly like all the other good art dealers they’d worked with: professional, supportive and non-meddling. “It’s like surgery,” Blokhin said, of how Taittinger knows his place. “He doesn’t tell you where to cut.”

Also on hand was the blond and tanned Elodie, a former lawyer who still helps out on the business side of things but mostly lets Taittinger handle the client-facing side of his business, the pitching part. “He’s very good at it,” she said, noting that they were married after just one year together. “That’s why I said yes!”

I had to say goodbye, so I interrupted Taittinger, briefly, as he explained a light-up reenvisioning of Adam and Eve in rubber to a collector. I also wanted to ask a quick follow-up question: the Champagne that the caterers were toting...

“It’s family, yes,” he said.