



Art market

ART MARKET

Artists' co-op dumps dealers to sell direct

Still House Group finds success without galleries, but critics say sales aren't everything

by RACHEL CORBETT



An artists' co-operative seeking to do away with the traditional gallery model is attracting prominent collectors who are buying work from the group directly, rather than through dealers.

Now in its eighth year, the Still House Group is becoming a market force. In January, the members—none of whom are more than 30 years old—opened a gallery in Manhattan to mount their own solo shows. This month, they are the subject of an exhibition at the Zabłudowicz Collection in London, “Testing Ground: the Still House Group” (1 March-5 April). Another show of the members’ works closes on 15 March at the Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens in Belgium.

More of a business collective than an art collective, the members of the Brooklyn-based group—artists Isaac Brest, Alex Perweiler, Nick Darmstaedter, Louis Eisner, Jack Greer, Brendan Lynch, Dylan Lynch and Zachary Susskind—do not collaborate on work, but

share the proceeds of each other's sales. "It is important for us to have a direct relationship with collectors, so we got rid of the middle man," says Issac Brest, who co-founded the group with Alex Perweiler.

Rather than the traditional 50%-50% sale breakdown at galleries, Still House artists receive 60% of the proceeds from their work. Another 30% goes into a pool to support the group, covering expenses including rent for studio space, a residency programme, insurance, books, employee salaries and production advances. The remaining 10% goes to the seller (anyone in the group is allowed to make a sale).

The collector Anita Zabłudowicz, who first visited the group's studio in 2013, says that while "others might consider it more risky not to work with galleries", she was not deterred. "If a group of artists are able to support each other to make work that they want, and... that collectors want, without being represented by galleries, then it should be embraced."

Other collectors "often need a vouching mechanism", Issac Brest says. For a while, the group was reliant on art advisers to fill that role. The same goes for curators and the press, who he says have "been hesitant to give us a pure pat on the back".

Some critics question how alternative the model really is. Issac Brest makes nearly all of the sales, functioning as its de facto dealer. He "fancies himself savvy yet hinders the artists he represents due to his lack of context, relationships and basic experience in the field", says the art adviser Meredith Darrow.

She says that clients have taken note of the group's recent auction prices, which suggest increasing speculation. Christie's, London set a record for Louis Eisner last October when Untitled, 2011, sold for £134,500, doubling pre-sale expectations (est £50,000-£70,000). This was a jump from May 2014, when the artist's Knucklehead 98098-9 XXXXXXXX, 2013, sold for \$53,125—more than five times its \$8,000 low estimate at Sotheby's, New York. Meanwhile, Christie's, London sold a painting by Nick Darmstaedter, 1-800-SCREEN, 2013, for £60,000 (est £30,000-£50,000) last month.

It is unclear whether the group can match the level of career and artistic development that some galleries offer. A successful model for representation "is not just based on transactions and sales", says the art adviser Heather Flow. "I'm not sure that the group can provide their members with that level of curatorial and critical support."

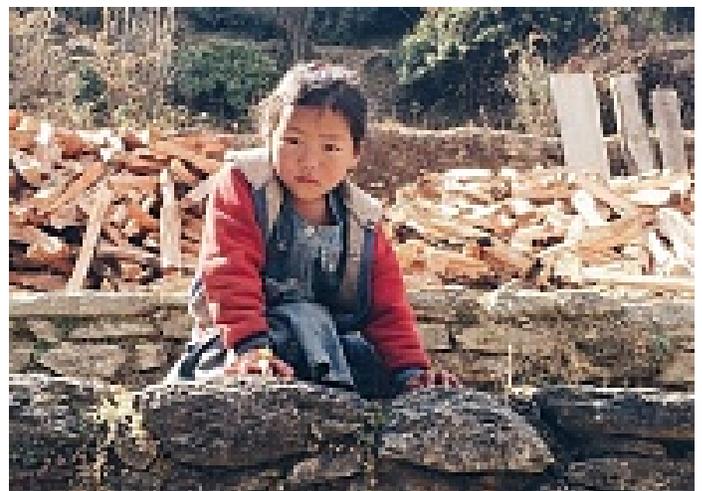
Brest dismisses criticisms, saying that interest in the group is so high that he does not "go out and actively sell things. It's really more that people are seeking us out." It probably helps that the group is well connected: the collector and adviser Mark Fletcher staged and bought out one of the group's first shows; Brest's father is the film director and art collector Martin Brest; Eisner's father is Eric Eisner, the former president of the Geffen Company.

It remains to be seen whether other artists will emulate the Still House Group's model. Brest thinks their chemistry would be hard to replicate, but says "we're proving to young artists you can take a career into your own hands. There's not just one singular path."

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