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# Art Advisor Heather Flow on How to Collect Artists on the Vanguard

By Andrew M. Goldstein

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The art advisor Heather Flow

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If you frequent the galleries of New York, from the stately halls of Chelsea to the dingier pockets downtown or in Brooklyn, the odds are you've come across the art advisor **Heather Flow**, typically in mid-tête-à-tête with an artist, dealer, or curator. An elegant presence in the art world, flow has built a reputation as a specialist adept at navigating art that's on the vanguard, identifying new talents as they're bubbling up from the smaller galleries, say on the Lower East Side. This is a very useful skill to have, considering that it both

allows her clients to collect at the level where things are most exciting and fastest-moving, and it also gives them the opportunity to buy important artists before they become famous— and expensive.

These days, with her profile rising, Flow has grown her operation to include a small staff, and a global outlook. With one of the year's best opportunities to collect emerging art returning to Miami this week with the latest edition of **NADA** at the **Deauville Resort and Hotel**, **Artspace** editor-in-chief **Andrew M. Goldstein** spoke to the advisor about how she manages to root out the best new work, and why the present moment is the most overlooked historical period in contemporary art history.

**How did you become an art advisor, and what led you to gravitate to working with the newest art?**

Well, when I was first beginning as an art advisor, I realized that I was young, and that I could approach that in two ways: I could either view it as a disadvantage, because I didn't have the experience other people had, or I could use it to my advantage and really get to know the artists of my generation. Many of these artists were undocumented, in a way, because they had only had one or two shows and had received no press, and they were often just getting to the point where they were able to talk about what they were doing. So getting to know these artists wasn't the easiest task—it's much easier when you can read multiple catalogues written by articulate curators. But, for me, it was much more exciting to talk about my generation, because I feel very strongly that in the past 10 years every aspect of our lives and our entire daily experience has changed so dramatically.

I mean think about it, it's like our understanding of time has changed. Our concepts of gender, sexuality, language, and time have all changed. Like, how many time zones do I operate in over a single day? I wake up in my office and we're speaking with Europe from 7:30 a.m. until noon, then we deal with New York and the East Coast, and then we move over to L.A. and Asia. Of course we're moving and eating and sleeping in Eastern Standard Time, but it's not the way it used to be. So, what are the artists who have experience this period making that addresses this change in the human condition? I really wanted to be in the middle of it, of this crazy time.

## **How young were you when you got started?**

I was 25. I had worked at PS1 before that doing exhibition funding, and then I went to work for the American Federation of Arts, giving tours to our trustees. So I was super young at the time, and the trustees were very wide ranging in terms of their art historical knowledge, so the questions would be from every which way—like, “How does this show of Bob Gober compare to the show that I saw him make when I was a curator at the Jewish Museum in 1978?” I was like, “Oh my god, I have no idea.” Then someone else would ask, “How much does this cost? And what distinguishes a museum piece from a piece a collector can buy?”

The questions were so varied, so I would practice before before the tours with some friends who would come with me to look at the art and ask me questions. Some of these friends had the resources to buy artworks, and eventually they said, “We’d really love to buy some art—do you think you can help us?” And I said, “Okay, sure, sounds fun!” Then one day a friend sat me down and said, “When are you getting a real job? Maybe you should consider this as a job.”

## **At this point, what were the galleries you were frequenting? What was your milieu?**

Since my friends had the resources to go through Chelsea themselves, they were most interested in me taking them around the Lower East Side. And of course the Lower East Side was not brand new—Reena Spaulings had been there, Orchard had been there, Miguel Abreu had been there, Michele Maccarone had been there—but there was a whole other group of newer galleries like Museum 52, On Stellar Rays, Lisa Cooley, Rachel Uffner that was beginning to put on shows regularly, and that was something my friends didn’t know. So it was a really exciting time, and I was able to walk them through that experience.

Many of the artists that these galleries were showing were just beginning their careers, making art that came into the gallery without the context of a broader body of work, and that often brought with it novel approaches to materials, modes of display, and cultural

references. It can be very difficult in looking at such fresh work to know when something is of high quality. When you're looking at something so new and challenging, how do you find an entry point to it?

A lot of that is just about looking for a long period of time, which is something that's very important for me. Merely looking with your eyes. Not many people do that anymore, spending a long period of time in front of a work and just looking at it, studying it compositionally. Also, studio visits are a big part of it. Sometimes, if a language isn't fully developed yet, you can get major clues from those conversations, and the clues don't even need to have anything with the artwork. It could just be a statement like, "My favorite director is Lars van Trier," and you think, "Oh my god, that makes so much sense now! That was actually a missing link—I get it!" So it just takes a lot of legwork.

**How would you say you approach surveying the art landscape for significant works? Is it driven by taste, by a philosophy, by pragmatic considerations, or something else?**

There are definitely aspects of all of those that you can't deny. If you want to live with all your work and you like an installation by Thomas Hirschhorn, well, that's not going to work. That's a pragmatic issue. And taste is something we all have, and it's great as long as you acknowledge what your taste is and realize that if certain artists are not exactly to your taste it doesn't mean that they're bad, it just means that it's not something that you're naturally attracted to. Then I don't think taste comes in the way of understanding strong work.

But for me, what it's really the framework of looking at whether an artist is doing something that is building on the past but breaking away from the past. And a lot of times those pieces are the ones that make you uncomfortable. Also, if you like a young artist and can see that they were strongly influenced by an older artist, then that's a sign that maybe you should also try to acquire a work by that older artist. So you begin to pay attention to the larger network of who has influenced this artist's practice, and who's supporting them critically and commercially.

But, beyond that, I always come back to the idea that the most important thing is a good, strong work. Always. Because maybe the artist is someone who will stop making work and never will matter again, but as long as the piece itself is really strong, it's going to be a strong work for the rest of time. If you kind of just go with an artist's name, on the other hand, because you know that the artist is someone who has a strong practice, the piece that you acquire might not be his strongest piece. That's not a model that I'd like to follow.

**Would you say that the collectors who are guided by big names are looking for investment opportunities, or just following trends?**

Investment is an easy example of why someone might do that. But I think there are actually a number of really good collectors who are busy and don't have the time to look through the entire oeuvre and say, "Oh, actually this isn't a bad work, but this other work by this artist is actually so much stronger. Maybe I should wait and see if I can get access to that work instead."

**When you're following these young artists and watching them from show to show, how can you tell when someone's career is about to take off, and that they're going to become a successful artist both critically and commercially?**

It really is just about having looked at enough to know what the artist has attempted to do in the past. Maybe you thought, "They should make this part a little bit stronger" or "This part should be a little softer" or "The culmination of the styles were never congruent enough," and then there's that moment where the artist has a complete body of work in a new show that resolves a majority of those issues, showing that they understood what they needed to do and tackled it successfully. It's hard to explain, because it's not an algorithm, and it's not something that's clear and universal. Every artist's challenges are unique.

**Speaking of challenges, what are some areas of art today that you find the most challenging, and discomfiting, in a productive or promising way? What do you find yourself drawn to but are still chewing over?**

For a younger set, I would say it's what Cameron Rowland did in his first show at Essex Street Gallery earlier this year. Part of the concept of the show was that any collector who was interested in a work would be able to rent the work for a set number of years, paying a set fee per month, with that model stipulated by the work itself. For someone as young of him to take such a strong commercial stance and to create a new commercial model is really interesting. Darren Bader does something like that too, but Darren's work has a humor to it and Cameron's work is really dealing with labor and the labor society. I think he's an incredibly interesting artist. But with that kind of thing, how do you tell a collector that there's this work they need to buy, but they're not actually not buying it, they're just renting it for three years at a rate of \$250 a month, and then after then years they have to give it back.

**That reminds me of how artists like Murakami and Hirst made the market part of their work during the boom years, and how Tino Seghal made modes of exchange central to his mythos afterward.**

Cameron's work isn't really about business or the art market, though—it's really talking about the labor market. Even in his last show where these stipulations were made, the work was all dealing with a relatively recent urban-planning policy where the New York Housing Authority gives entrepreneurs money instead of giving it directly to community centers. What I think makes his work so interesting is that the people that have had this type of conversation in their work in the past have been art-world-oriented, while his work is really speaking about economic inequality and the systems surrounding that. That's what makes me so excited about it, because can you name one artist who's work you like who lives in the West and is speaking about economic inequality?

**It's amazing, now that performance and other kinds of traditionally anti-market art have been recuperated into the cannon, how many kinds of ways there are of making art that don't rely on canvas or conventional materials.**

The options for materials really have opened up significantly, really from the 1980s to the present day. There isn't as much restriction when it comes to traditional materials, and I think that allows for an untraditional understanding of how to use those materials, and

you're also seeing the use of materials whose history is really, really young.

**Since this is the week of Art Basel Miami Beach, let's talk about art fairs. Of all the emerging-level fairs in America, NADA is by far the most established. When you go to a fair like NADA, how do you ensure that you can get your clients what they want—to get them the best work? Is the business pretty much done before the fair opens?**

I wouldn't say that everything's done before the fair opens, because at art fairs everything changes the first day. Oftentimes, things that were on definite reserve come off reserve, and sometimes even confirmed sales are reversed. Nothing is really definite, and while there's a belief that that all of the works are already spoken for by collectors, that's not always true. There are very small groups of artists where that might be true, but there are plenty of other really good artists—maybe even better artists—who have work available at the fair. It's not all gone before the opening of the fair.

But it's certainly necessary to do research before the fair for sure, and then when you're there it's important to remember that it's a fair, and that the context of viewing works is not the same as in a gallery exhibition. It's impossible to understand the full extent of an artist's practice at an art fair like NADA, for instance, because it's often brand new—it's an opportunity to begin learning about the artist. So when I encounter an artist I don't know at a fair, I really try to be as patient as possible, to look at the works and take them in—which isn't easy at an art fair. And then I speak with the gallery and ask them to explain the work to me and have them send me a packet of information after the fair so I can review it, because you can't judge an artist's practice by one work.

**It sounds like you use fairs as an information-gathering and educational opportunity as much as a commercial opportunity. Is that right?**

Yes, it's more like that for us. We know the artists who we're interested in, and if there's someone else I think a client might be interested in who will have works there then I'll do research and have a conversation with the client before the fair opens to say, "There's this artist, this is their practice, this is the work that's going to be there, here's all the background information, let's make sure to look at it in person."

**When it comes to the clients that you work with, how do you choose them? Do they fit any certain type?**

The way I would put it is that they are people I respect, genuine people who I can get along with. I think that in terms of the number of clients I work with, it's really a balance of making sure that we have enough clients to pay the bills but not so many that we can't provide the same level of conversation and depth and breadth for each of them to take away from the experience. I actually might take the wrong economic stance on it, because it would be much easier if I had clients who were all interested in the same things, but to me that's really boring—I much prefer having clients who are interested in different things so that it ends up being like a well-rounded meal for me, if you know what I mean.

So, ok, if one person is interested in punk art, another person is interested in Capitalist Realism, and another person is interested in the conceptual idea of labor in a Situationist way. It's interesting for me to have collectors with these kinds of focuses, because then we can build a collection that holds together and we can make it more interesting than any museum can, because we don't have the same bureaucracy surrounding acquisitions and can just go with our gut and say, "This is work is really strange but it's super cool and it's going to look great in the collection, so let's add it."

**The spread of art that your clients are interested in sounds far more global than just the Lower East Side scene that you sprang out of, if you're talking about Capitalist Realism and the Situationists. How can you possibly keep tabs on the markets for such a widely dispersed and historically diverse variety of artworks?**

I have two people who work for me full time, and keeping track of those markets is the majority of what we do when we're not running around seeing shows—and part of that is also talking with people, and it's really important to have a group of people who you really trust and can have conversations with where they challenge you.

**Do you want your clients to challenge you as well?**

Yeah, and all of them do. They're not imbeciles—they're smart people and sometimes there are things that they see and can clarify for me in a way that's very illuminating. That's something that I'm insistent about within my company, that we are true partners with our clients—we're not telling them that they have to do this or do that and being a dictator, though we're certainly saying that maybe they should consider something and pushing them toward new things. I want it to be a relationship where we work together to get the best works. Because they're smart people, so why not try to team up together?

**The collectors you describe sound like they're fun to work with. But earlier this year, much was made about a supposed new breed of speculative collectors—the “flippers”—who are applying a day-trading approach to the market, buying young and selling high. What do you make of that development, and is it really new?**

I mean, flipping has been around for longer than we want to admit, but something that is new is that a certain aspect of the auctions seems to suggest that the market is engineering a kind of psychological obsolescence around new art. This is something that we see in design and fashion, and I think it's beginning to seep into the art world because nowadays certain so-called hot works quickly move into a subsidiary economy where they can circulate indefinitely and then in rare cases get a second life when they reacquire symbolic value. It's something that I started thinking about recently, and part of it might be the result of an increase in the velocity of the market, and the relentless drive for constant change. And looking at technology and fashion, I feel that this desire for change coupled with velocity of the ability to change has led to a problem. It's a strange connection, right?

**The connection to engineered obsolescence in the fashion and technology spheres is very interesting, I think. If you look at the arc of young artists' auction records over the course of this year, you can see that there are many people whose work first went to auction in January and then after that went under the hammer maybe 20 or 30 times over the course of the year. Often in these cases, the first or second showing receives a high result and then the prices trend upward over the summer and before beginning to run out of gas, and**

people who were buzzing about these artists earlier in the year begin to roll their eyes. It's almost as if the lighting-quick seasonality of fashion, where fads are in and out in a flash, is coming to the art world.

Yeah, exactly—everything is happening much faster. Flipping has existed since the '70s, let's say, with the Scull auction, but not nearly at the same speed as it is today. When someone buys a work and less than a year later it's at another auction, that's crazy.

**Is this good, is this bad, or is it just new and the implications are not really understood?**

Well, I think it's bad! If you look at the implications of the fashion business you can see that when things move too quickly, ideas can't be developed, and good work can't be sustained.

Today there are a number of famous young artists who have become stars because of support from entrepreneurial collectors and dealers who encourage them to make reams of work, and often these are highly decorative process-driven abstract paintings that can achieve a kind of Instagram virality but receive almost nonexistent institutional support. Then, on the other hand, you have other young artists who are receiving enthusiastic institutional support but who are entirely outside of the market conversation. This is overstating the divide between these categories, but it seems a binary situation is developing where the market is artificially flavored and bad for you and then you have this farm-to-table thing with artists who are coming up more organically.

I think what's interesting about that is that of the two kinds of work that you're referring to on the opposite sides, one is made out of novelty and the other is most often made out of nostalgia, but both are motivated by dissatisfaction with the present. They share a quest for elsewhere, which to my mind explains why some collectors who are in my opinion good can easily jump between the avant and the retro modes.

That's fascinating, because when you think of someone exciting like Jana Euler, she really is totally retro and fascinating and painterly. It's like what you were saying earlier about the something-old-something-new sweet spot. On the topic of something old, you

obviously have collectors who are interested in historical periods outside of the present, like Capitalist Realism, that are more or less overlooked pockets of the market today. How do you divide your attention between looking at those historical bodies of work and the really current stuff?

I think they're both in conversation with each other. When a work is good it can speak multiple times across history, so it doesn't prove too challenging to have the two connected. Because oftentimes, if I'm speaking with a younger artist, they're very familiar with the older artists and have been influenced or inspired by them—it's not like the two worlds are so disconnected. You know, I went to see a great show by Reinhard Mucha at Sprüth Magers in Berlin this summer, and after seeing the show I was speaking to two artists and the one who knew his work said, "Yeah, he really influenced me—such an interesting guy," and the one who didn't know him said, "Oh my god, this is incredible—do you have a PDF of the work that you could send me?" And I was like, "Yeah, sure!" I think that having a respect for knowing where past works are coming from and what they're trying to do allows for a broader conversation, and these days the divide between historical periods seems to be much flatter.

**What is the overlooked historical period that you are most interested in exploring today?**

Can I say that the most interesting historical period is today? Today has not yet been historicized, and, as I said before, I think the era that we're living in now is particularly relevant and underappreciated. Because I feel like there's a postmodern bricolage of time and space that is a dissolving effect of the Internet, and which is incredibly fascinating to me. And I think one of the interesting things that you can see at NADA in particular is that post-production artists are erasing the distinction between consuming and producing, and that shift parallels what's happening in the larger economy, which is a transition from making money through objects to generating wealth through information services. If you walk through the fair you'll be able to see that kind of change, and that to me is why I'm so interested in our time.

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Matt Ducklo

*Pregnant Woman (First State), 1950, (Cast 1951-53)*  
*Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden, 2008*

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Valeska Soares

*Abridged (Anne of Green Gables), 2008*

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Caetano de Almeida

*Centripeta, 2013*

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Jackie Saccoccio

*Portrait (Patriot), 2013*

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Aiko Hachisuka

*Hulk, 2012*

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Margaret Lee

*Today and Everyday, 2010*

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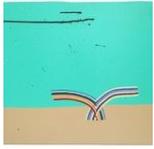


Thomas Dozol

*Colin (Hollow Space #1, Red), 2012*

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Alicia McCarthy



*Untitled, 2013*

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Jessica Rath  
*Clone with Central Leader, 2012*

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Bjorn Copeland  
*Tomatoes Over Easy, 2013*

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Aris Moore  
*Progress IV, 2012*

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Tauba Auerbach  
*Fold/Slice Topo II, 2011*

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Elaine Reichek  
*Swatches, Spero 1-3, 2007*

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Marianne Vitale  
*Marker 17, 2012*

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Kristen Morgin  
*Apollo Creed, 2013*



Jon Rafman  
*O'Keeffe Antechamber, 2013*



Alistair Frost  
*SPACEBARBROKEN, 2011*



Kianja Strobert  
*Untitled,*



Johannes VanDerBeek  
*Early Outline with Claw, 2014*



Phoebe Washburn  
*Peaceful Protest, 2008*



Valerie Snobeck  
*Give Out, 2013*



Nikolas Gambaroff  
*Untitled (Pine Cone), 2013*

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Adam McEwen



*Soy Sauce, 2012*

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Uri Aran  
*Untitled (WWW), 2012*

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Katrin Sigurdardóttir  
*1 out of 100 parts, 2014*

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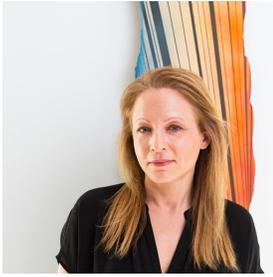


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