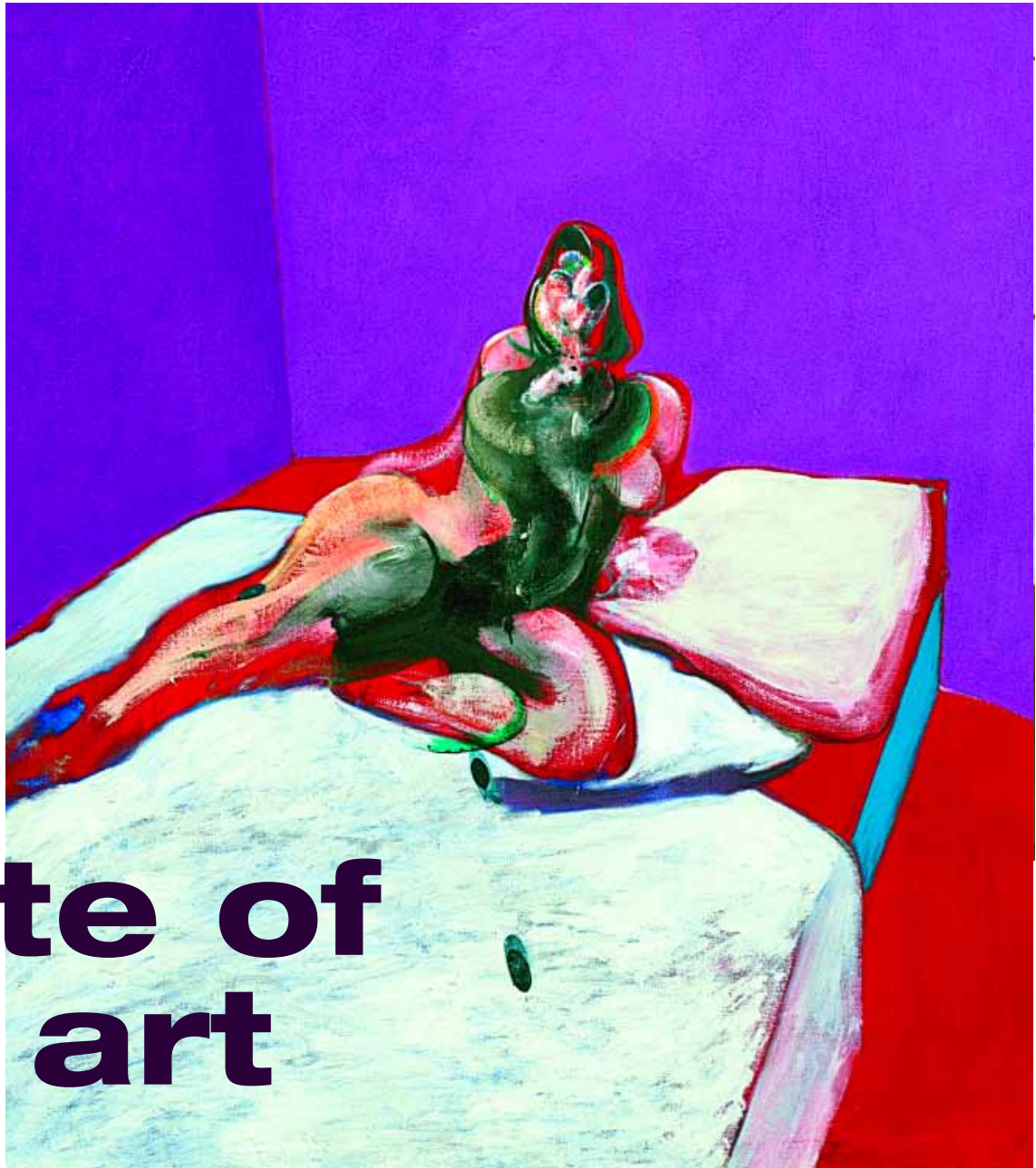


**AS THREE NEW GALLERIES OPEN IN MAYFAIR, AND THE FEBRUARY AUCTIONS SET A STRING OF NEW RECORDS, NUALA CALVI TAKES THE PULSE OF THE COMMERCIAL ART SCENE**



# State of the art

**D**espite the threat of a double-dip recession, the capital's commercial gallery scene appears to be blooming, with three new spaces launching in Mayfair in just a month.

Azerbaijani art dealer and curator Mila Askarova – whose Gazelli Art House has already held pop-up shows across the city – opens her first permanent London gallery at 39 Dover Street in March, programming international, contemporary artists ranging from established to up-and-coming talents.

Meanwhile, Eykyn Maclean has followed its successful launch in New York in 2010 with a gallery on St George Street, specialising in key Impressionist and 20th Century European and American artists.

And Ronchini Gallery moved into 22 Dering Street at the end of February – the first time the Italian contemporary art house has ventured outside Italy since its inception in Umbria in 1992.

According to Roxanna Farboud, business consultant at Ronchini, these gallery openings are being driven by the bounce in the art market. "The market had a tricky time in 2007/08 but it has really picked itself up," she says. "It's done so well recently, as auction results show – they're a measure of the health of the market. Particular areas, like German and Italian art, have been growing, and their sales at Christie's and Sotheby's have been doing well."

Last month's post-war and contemporary art evening auction at Christie's brought in £80.6 million against an estimate of £65 million, and achieved 95 per cent sales by value. Francis Bacon's Portrait of Henrietta Moraes sold for more than

£21 million, becoming the second most valuable work of post-war and contemporary art auctioned at Christie's London, and the highest price achieved in the category in London since February 2008.

Its Impressionist and modern art sales realised £179.1 million – the highest total for the category in London – beating the pre-sale estimate of £109.2-£170.6 million. The top price of the week was paid for Henry Moore's Reclining Figure: Festival, 1951, which sold for £19.1 million – a world record for the artist and the most paid for a British sculpture at auction since Damien Hirst's The Golden Calf went for £10.3 million in 2008.

Over at Sotheby's, the February contemporary art evening auction totalled £50.7 million against an estimate of £35.8-£49.7 million, again with strong sale rates of 95 per cent by value, and saw new records for artists AR Penck and Albert Oehlen.

According to Sotheby's chairman of contemporary art Europe, Cheyenne Westphal, the high results were driven by a very international mix of buyers: "We witnessed a huge depth of international bidding right across the auction, with buyers coming from no fewer than 20 countries."

Nicholas Maclean of Eykyn Maclean says: "It's difficult to say if the art market is back to the levels just before the Lehman Brothers crash, but it's fair to say that for certain artists it has become much stronger. German painting from 1960 onwards has been performing very, very well in the last few years, with Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke ahead of that gang. There is certainly a draw towards the big names."



**LEFT: NICHOLAS MCLEAN AND CHRISTOPHER EYKYN**

PHOTO: PHILIP SINDEN

**BELOW: MILA ASKAROVA**

**OPPOSITE: FRANCIS BACON, PORTRAIT OF HENRIETTA MORAES, 1963, WHICH MADE MORE THAN £21 MILLION AT AUCTION**

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Farboud says that, despite renewed confidence in the art market, in unstable economic times buyers are still looking for names they can trust. "There was a bit of a bubble previously where some artists who weren't necessarily the best were able to put their prices very high and people were dying to buy them," she says. "Now people are more conscious of their choices. You have to show good artists – ones already established in institutions, who have won prizes, who feature at art fairs."

She gives the example of Sergio Fermariello, whom Ronchini is featuring in April. He won the Saatchi & Saatchi International prize for young artists in 1989, had a dedicated room in the Italian pavilion at the Venice Biennale, is mid-career – and is loved by Ronchini's collectors.

"People also want you to be offering works of the best quality, in good condition with a good provenance – that haven't been too exposed to the market already," adds Maclean.

That is particularly the case when the art market is increasingly becoming a playground for investors, as they look for somewhere else to put their money while the European stock market plummets.

"Since 2008 there's been more of a development towards art as investment, because people can't necessarily keep money in the bank – you're not getting any interest anymore – whereas the returns for someone who bought a Christopher Wool for \$10,000 and is now selling it for \$200,000 are huge," says Farboud.

At Christie's, new buyers represented 12 per cent of the value of global sales last year. "We are seeing more investors collecting," says Steven P. Murphy, CEO of Christie's, "while there are many more collectors who are increasing their investment in their collections as the explosion of interest in art, fuelled by globalisation, meets the art that is coming to the market."

The result is that people who wouldn't have considered buying art in the past are looking at it now – and they need help choosing it.

That's a clientele that Gazelli Art House is hoping to target. "We're trying to create an easy access point to the new generation of collectors but not alienate those who've been collecting for a while," says Askarova. "There's a new generation who would like to collect but are quite unsure how to enter the market and what is worth investing in. The most obvious and easiest to buy into is the blue chip artists, but they can't necessarily afford them. They need some kind of confidence boost so they know exactly why they're investing in a particular artist."

She warns that there are also a large number of people wanting to get into the gallery business at the moment – but not all of them have the necessary background to help new buyers make the right choices: "At the end of the day it's important to have the theoretical education behind you so that you know what you're doing. Especially when you're dealing with contemporary art – it's an easy market to get into but hard to sustain."

For buyers, Mayfair still largely represents the more reassuring, conservative end of the market – and brands that they can trust, which is why galleries like Ronchini want to be here. "Lorenzo [Ronchini] could have chosen the east of London, but he didn't feel that it fitted with how he wanted to portray the gallery," explains Farboud. "He wanted to have a very high-end feel while still being contemporary at the same time."

For Maclean, it's more about geography. "Being in Mayfair makes sense because it's close to all the main hotels that clients from abroad stay in – and of course many of the clients live in Mayfair as well," he says. "And on the other side of the street we've got Sotheby's, so we get a lot of traffic passing through from there."

But as gallery rents in the younger east London art scene inevitably rise, Askarova predicts that more galleries will come back to central London – making competition even tougher in areas like Mayfair. "The pressure is on for a new gallery like us – and in Mayfair we're up against galleries that have been open 20 or 30 years," she says. "But I think if you believe in what you're bringing, it's worth a try."