

Jason BOYD KINSELLA

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The artist cultivated the curiosity of gallerists on Instagram before turning his practice into a multinational business.



Jason Boyd Kinsella and his work. Photo: Andris Søndrol Visdal.

Patrizia Koenig likes to be conservative with her estimates, and the arrival of a Jason Boyd Kinsella painting for consignment at Phillips about four months ahead of the auction house's spring day sale hardly qualified for an exception. She judged that the artist's *Thaws* portrait would sell for \$10,000 tops, an aspirational ceiling for a two-year-old painting by a newcomer without much of a market track record.

What happened next, the seasoned contemporary art specialist said, was "truly unexpected."

Within seconds, bidders had bulletted past the \$10,000 high estimate. Nearly 30 people competed for the Canadian artist's painting: a collection of colorful, voluminous shapes organized into the familiar pose of a portrait sitter. The final price, including auction-house fees, came in at \$441,000. Koenig's high estimate was off by 4,310 percent.



Jason Boyd Kinsella, *Thaws* (2020). Photo courtesy of Phillips.

For his part, Kinsella—who returned to painting full-time in 2019 after a 30-year stint working in the advertising industry—would rather not discuss such acts of debasement. During an interview, the painter declined to answer questions about the sale, beyond saying that he simply didn't watch.

“You anticipate something like this would happen,” he said. “You try not to pay much attention.”

At 52, with a full career in another industry behind him, Kinsella is perhaps an unlikely art star. But he shares similarities with auction darlings like Javier Calleja, Huang Yuxing, and Allison Zuckerman, all of whom have found success with bright palettes and graphic imagery that translates well to a computer screen.

In just over two years, Kinsella’s art has earned him a growing audience, especially in Asia, where wealthy millennials have made a sport out of speculating on the ultra-contemporary crowd, a term used to describe artists born after 1974. Although Kinsella has technically aged out of this designation, his prices reflect characteristic buoyancy: Earlier this week, his painting *Summers (the elder)*, made just last year, sold at Phillips Hong Kong for HK\$1.6 million (\$208,658)—more than six times its already-elevated high estimate of \$32,100.

A Later Start

Born in 1969 in Toronto, Kinsella grew up attending after-school programs at the Art Gallery of Ontario. He received an arts degree from Bishop’s University in Quebec, studying painting and sculpture before heading into the advertising industry for the next 30 years.

“It was fun to be creative and get paid,” Kinsella said, although he shied away from discussing details of his career. Online, his name is attached to several commercials as an art director for the global advertising firm McCann, for which he produced media for the Toronto Blue Jays, a Canadian baseball team.

In 2008, he moved to Norway, where his wife is from; the couple now live in Oslo with their children. All the while, he continued painting as a hobby. But around his 50th birthday in 2019, he decided to quit advertising to pursue art full-time. He now works out of a studio in a retired ship-building factory near the river, painting to a soundtrack of jazz.



Jason Boyd Kinsella at work. Photo: Andris Søndrol Visdal.

Kinsella cites a wide range of influences on his work: color theory from Vermeer and shadows from Caravaggio; cubism from Picasso and bodyweight from Henry Moore. One of his gallerists, Victoria Thut of Perrotin, likens him to Magritte; Koenig thinks he evokes George Condo.

“The idea of psychological portraiture is central,” Kinsella says in a video promoting his first solo exhibition at Unit London in 2021. He tinkers with the small, white geometric models on a coffee table, sipping from a mug imperceptibly placed among the maquette pieces. He looks like one of the men in an L.L. Bean catalogue. “I gravitate to geometric blocks because they are the simplest and most honest forms of expression that enable me to see a person without distractions. There’s nowhere to hide.”

Kinsella has an obsession with the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, a personality test that supposedly determines one’s affinity with characteristics like introversion, intuition, emotion, and perception. In the 1980s, the artist received a book from his mother with the test questions inside. “I answered all these questions and read about my personality. I was shocked—it was crazy accurate,” he told me. (The artist’s personality type is INFJ.) “Archetypes themselves are like vessels. It’s our experiences that fill them up and make us individual.”

Now, he builds his own vessels. Kinsella starts with sketchbook drawings. Good doodles are transferred to his computer through iPhone snapshots, which he edits and infuses with color. From there, it’s back to the canvas where a final painting emerges.

Occasionally, he hires a digital producer to create videos of his compositions as three-dimensional sculptures in virtual space. The resulting images are slick and polished —“superclean,” as the artist describes them.

From Instagram to the World

Success came quickly. When he committed to painting full-time in 2019, Kinsella started documenting his journey on Instagram. Within a week of his first post in May 2020, he was contacted by the British gallery Unit London. Less than a year later, he opened his first exhibition there.

Around the same time, Tom-David Bastok, a co-founder of Perrotin, found the Instagram account. He forwarded it to Thut, an employee at the gallery’s Paris location, who started a conversation with Kinsella. (The artist currently has more than 21,500 followers.)



Jason Boyd Kinsella, *Summers (the elder)* (2021). Photo courtesy of Phillips.

Perrotin showed the Canadian's paintings at its Paris location, Art Basel Miami Beach, and Art Basel Hong Kong. (He continues to be represented by Unit London.)

"Everything that we ever had from Jason has sold," Thut said.

An early acquisition by the Long Museum in Shanghai helped accelerate buzz. For a recent commission from Hong Kong-based fintech executive Alan Lau, Kinsella interviewed the collector on Zoom, using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to learn more about his personality. The resulting portrait, *Alan*, includes a blue figure on a black background with a white ring and three moons appearing to orbit around the sitter's head.

“Everything has happened in a really compressed two-and-a-half-year period from when I posted my work on Instagram to where we are now,” Kinsella said. Nevertheless, he is determined to keep his focus. On Instagram, he often poses alongside his paintings like a proud father.

“I feel fortunate,” he said. “The universe sometimes speaks to you and says, ‘It’s going pretty good.’”