

Perrotin

New York Observer

September 2013

The Gaul With Gall: Emmanuel Perrotin Brings His Très Français Neo Pop to Madison Avenue

By Dan Duray | 9/17 5:45pm



Emmanuel Perrotin, the international art dealer (who is sometimes known as "the French Gagosian") seemed preoccupied as he walked down Madison Avenue from Café Boulud on 72nd Street and Madison Avenue to his new, 4,300-square-foot space at 73rd Street and Madison Avenue, which opens this week.

The moodiness was uncharacteristic for a man whose Paris- and Hong Kong-based gallery represents sensational artists like KAWS, JR and Maurizio Cattelan and has helped stage a show for Takashi Murakami, another of his artists, at Versailles without it even looking very hard. This is also to say nothing of his reputation for throwing the best dinners and art fair parties, for having openings where Massive Attack might play a set, for being the guy art adviser Sandy Heller sends his clients to when they're looking for a good time in Paris, for being a duke of Le Baron.

"I don't know when his parties end, because I've never seen the end of one of them," collector and *Observer* columnist Adam Lindemann said.

"He's a very cool dude basically," said Christie's specialist Loic Gouzer, who the *Daily News* once had smoking with January Jones at a party. "It's good to have a bit of French *va va voom* coming in."

And yes, the opening party had already been planned: It was going to be an "an amusement-park- and carnival-themed bash," as Page Six cooed, at the Russian Tea Room where guests would be able to throw balls at KAWS pieces to win a prize, and Jean-Michel Othoniel and Johan Creten would offer temporary tattoos of their artwork. But opening the New York space hadn't been all fun and games.

"It's inevitable to open, at a certain point, in New York," Mr. Perrotin said. "But New York can kill you also. I was always afraid when people said during many many years, 'But why you don't open in New York?' And I said, 'If I open in New York, it's going to kill me.'"

"First of all, because in this city the national sport is to steal the artist," he continued. "It's war." Then there was the cost. His family was middle class (either his father or grandfather was a butcher—this changes in his origin story sometimes), and, while he has helped stage shows for his artists in places like Qatar, it's not as though his money is endless—during the recent financial crisis, he had to close a Miami space he'd opened in 2004. He decried galleries supported by a single big collector or family money, calling it "artificial income." His favorite author, he said, is "Francis Scott Fitzgerald," and he worries about becoming one of those characters who has lived too well for too long, been stretched too thin. "Maybe I'm totally a bluff," he said. "Maybe they think I do a good job somewhere; maybe here they will realize I'm very bad."

Opening a New York gallery became obligatory, albeit a “nice obligation,” if Mr. Perrotin didn’t want to start losing his artists to other galleries, though one he could never have foreseen when he started out. He had his first gallery job at age 17, which he was able to maintain while attending school because he attended the Mitterrandist Lycée autogéré de Paris where “we decided everything in committee where we had one vote, all the teachers had one vote, same as us.” He wanted to be a screenwriter, but a friend needed a gallery assistant, and this fit in well with his nightlife. “I was a big dancer, at 15 years old,” he said. “I was going to all the nightclubs, very trendy, le palais, le ...”

He opened his own gallery, when he was 21, on the Rue de Turbigo near the Centre Pompidou, part of a floating scene of five or six apartment galleries where the parties would spill into the street and they’d all move together when someone’s lease was up. For a long time while he was starting out, he would sleep in another room of his gallery, which impressed Maurizio Cattelan, who also used to sleep in galleries for international shows.

“It was an obsession for him,” Mr. Cattelan said. “And I had had the same problems, so this is probably what made me believe in him.”

Mr. Perrotin would attend what art fairs he could on his budget, his first in Japan, mainly out of curiosity about the country, and it was there that he first encountered the work of Takashi Murakami, who he eventually became the first to show outside the country, at the 1994 Gramercy International Art Fair. For the first five or 10 years of attending fairs, he said, he only brought items that were small enough to carry in his luggage (for Murakami, this often meant T-shirts.)

To bring one of Damien Hirst’s early medicine cabinets to Paris, he strapped it to the roof of his mom’s car and took the Dover ferry, this after giving the artist one of his first solo shows in 1991.

People now talk about how little things sold for in that show and how much they would later sell for, but, Mr. Perrotin points out, “My show of Damien Hirst was only a table from an autopsy room, a scalpel in formaldehyde and photo of suicide people on the wall, a photo of Damien Hirst smiling next to a decapitated head. You can’t suspect me to do that for money. It was clearly difficult works to introduce from a young artist, unknown.”

Mr. Murakami would go on to join Gagosian, and Mr. Hirst White Cube. Mr. Perrotin has no hard feelings about that (what can you do when “the guy starts to produce sharks in a tank?”), but he never lost his flare for attention-getting. In 2000, he participated in a piece by Mr. Cattelan titled *Perrotin le Vrai Lapin* in which the dealer wore a costume that resembled both a pink rabbit and a phallus.

The invitation to the show listed a number of Mr. Perrotin's female "how you say, *conquêtes*?" said his director of 15 years, Peggy Leboeuf, who is heading up the gallery in New York. "Well, it worked, didn't it? We're still talking about it today!"

Mr. Perrotin is willing to do whatever it takes to help and promote his artists, which is important since, he said, almost all of his sales come from new works rather than ones he has for resale, which are the bread and butter for many other galleries. (As Dave Hickey once said of the art world of the '80s and '90s, there was the common situation in which "you walk into a gallery and the front room would be [a] work ... comprised of confetti and dog turds and their social relevance. ... Then if you could get to the back room with your shoes clean you would buy the Donald Judd.")

In 2012, the same year he opened a branch in Hong Kong, Mr. Perrotin opened in Le Marais, one of Paris's tonier districts, which endeared him to Xavier Veilhan, an artist in his stable. "At the time, it was only Thaddeus Ropac and Marian Goodman and galleries like that, and there is now incredible development in the Marais," Mr. Veilhan said. "If you get there on Saturdays for the openings, the streets are so full of people walking that a car can't drive. It really [changed] the landscape."

For graffiti artist JR, Mr. Perrotin had Massive Attack play an impromptu show in the Marais space, locking the doors so that people on the street wouldn't swarm the gallery beyond capacity. "It had so much more energy than a usual show where you have the people showing up, looking at the art and then leaving right away," JR said.

"He's the ringmaster of his circus," Mr. Lindemann said. "It's a circus over there."

"I like to say he's a loudspeaker," Mr. Cattelan said.

And whose idea was it to have Mr. Perrotin and his pal Pharrell Williams appear at one opening in horse costumes?

At a Fashion Week party to debut his sculpture collaboration with Perrotin artist Daniel Arsham, Mr. Williams rolled his eyes: "Of course, it was his! I was like, 'Dude, this is gonna end up all over the papers everywhere.' He was like, 'Exactly, my dear!' You know how he talks."

"Oh, you must mention the 'French Gagosian' thing in your article," said Stephanie, Mr. Arsham's wife who used to work at the gallery. "He loves that. He'll pretend not to love it, but he loves it." (For the record, he says the nickname comes from the fact that he used to discuss the art market with journalists in France before other French dealers did it, and the French, being the way they are, pegged him as a capitalist.)

Naturally, this ringleader attitude is coupled with a flare for salesmanship.

"I passed on everything by Maurizio Cattelan. I hated Maurizio Cattelan," said Mr. Lindemann, who is the godfather of Mr. Perrotin's infant daughter. "And then I remember Emmanuel said to me, 'The thing about Maurizio Cattelan is that it's *possible* he is the greatest artist of this generation. That really really got into my head. It's *possible* that he might be the greatest artist of this generation.'" Two years ago, Mr. Lindemann was a lender to the Guggenheim's Cattelan retrospective.

There's a downside to such showiness too, of course. One Chelsea dealer said Mr. Perrotin recently sought advice on how to lure less flashy artists to his gallery.

"Every artist is commercial; every artist wants to sell," the dealer said. "But not necessarily every artist wants to have the crowds that want your autographs or the circus around him."

The gallery expects to add more artists in New York, at Mr. Perrotin's discretion. "We can give names and suggestions and group shows, but for sure it's Emmanuel's choice," Ms. Leboeuf said. The gallery has also hired Lucien Terras, formerly of the now-defunct Chelsea gallery D'Amelio Terras, to be a New York director, so there's little chance of it becoming an afterthought outpost.

For artists already represented by the gallery, it's an opportunity for a new audience. Mr. Perrotin says he expects very little turf war over his artists who already have New York representation. Lehmann Maupin, for example, has planned a show with Klara Kristalova for this spring, and he plans to stage a concurrent smaller show of her work in his downstairs space.

"I am happy to be in New York," he said after a tour of his new gallery. He stood outside the upstairs office, where a handful of gallery workers were using a computer program to lay out the debut show, of Italian artist Paola Pivi. "What they say in France is the swimming pool. There is the small one of the baby and the big one?"

"The big fish in a small pond?" I asked. "Or maybe small fish, big pond?"

"Yes, but that's not the same," he said. "Because if you have the baby who goes in the water that cannot dive and you have ..."

"It's not big fish-small pond?"

"No, no, it's not big fish. Maybe if you don't have water you will die, whereas here you go to the swimming pool?"

We consulted with a British gallery assistant.

"Thrown in the deep end!"

"Yes!" he said. Then gestured at the assistants laying out the artist's show. "I'm not going to let them drown."