

SEANKELLY

Miller, M.H.. "At a New York Gallery, Confronting the Art World's Existential Crisis," *The New York Times*, May 1, 2018.

The New York Times

At a New York Gallery, Confronting the Art World's Existential Crisis



A rendering of a Collect Wisely billboard on 10th Avenue, near Sean Kelly Gallery.
Collect Wisely, Sean Kelly, New York

To a casual observer, the art world probably looks like nothing more than a corporate monolith producing easy profits for auction houses, galleries and collectors, all attracted to the sale of art for its potential investment opportunities. Christie's reported art sales totaling \$6.6 billion in 2017, anchored by the sale of a \$450 million Leonardo da Vinci painting — which became the most expensive artwork ever sold — even though its authenticity was questioned by scholars and critics. In March, at the Art Basel fair in Hong Kong (a trade show featuring 248 galleries from across the globe), a co-founder of Microsoft bought a Willem de Kooning painting for \$35 million. Later this month, a \$150 million Modigliani will go on sale at Sotheby's in New York, a highlight of a spring auction season that Bloomberg has already predicted "is poised to be the biggest on record." The rise of this commercial aristocracy has become something of a philosophical dilemma for many in the art world: People seem more interested in money than art itself.

One gallery owner, Sean Kelly, is trying to change that. This week, he launches an initiative called Collect Wisely, an advertisement- and event-driven campaign that, he hopes, will reinvigorate the collecting class's interest in actual art. The campaign includes ads placed in various publications (including *The New York Times*) featuring phrases like "Will history remember you as an investor or a collector?" And near Kelly's shop on 10th Avenue is a billboard carrying the slogan "Connoisseurship is not a dirty word."

"For me, collecting is not about whether I'm going to make a lot of money," Kelly says. "It's about whether I found something that I can't live without." But now, he adds, "It's only about money."

That's a complaint many people who work in the art market have made in private, but as dissent grows with the direction of the business, it's become an increasingly public grievance among even successful galleries, like Kelly's.

SEAN KELLY

Still, saying that art has become too much about money is something of an odd position to take when you own a business that only exists if people spend money on art. Kelly is cautious about not calling out anyone in particular: “We’re not trying to criticize anybody or say that anyone is doing something wrong,” he says. He has ventured further into the belly of the beast by launching this initiative during the week of another major art fair — Frieze New York, which opens to collectors on Wednesday — where he will also be exhibiting. But in addition to trying to sell art at the fair, he’ll be recording live conversations with collectors — which will eventually be published as part of a recurring podcast on the gallery’s website — about what it means to be a connoisseur of art, rather than merely a shopper. A final tier of Collect Wisely will be a series of invite-only salons held at the gallery, where people from a variety of backgrounds — collectors, but also, Kelly hopes, writers, musicians and scientists — will gather for dinner and to discuss art’s emotional, rather than monetary, value.

To underscore the importance of the project, Kelly mentioned one of the artists he represents, Kehinde Wiley, who recently painted the official presidential portrait of Barack Obama. Wiley’s portrait was covered widely by outlets ranging from [Artforum](#) to [CNN](#), and the painting has broken attendance records for the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., where it is now on view. This was the first time Kelly could remember an artist generating national headlines for something other than what their work was worth or sold for.

“Of course, we sell expensive things, and I’m not trying to be naïve,” he says. “I’m not King Canute trying to hold the waves back. But I want to start a conversation that emphasizes the pleasure of collecting, rather than the value of it. It’s about passion, which is what all the great collections have been formed by. They haven’t been investment strategies — it’s about passion.”