

# SEANKELLY

Loeb-Obrenan, Pauline. "Interview with Sean Kelly." *Artfairmag*, October 2021.

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Initially operating privately in Soho, NYC, the gallery founded in 1991 by Sean Kelly moved to Mercer Street four years later. In 2001, the Sean Kelly Gallery took a major step forward by moving into a 7,000 square foot industrial space in Chelsea. Up-and-coming names such as Anthony Gormley and Espírito Santo entered the gallery. The gallery took on an even greater dimension when it moved into a historic 1914 building at 475 Tenth Avenue. The 22,000 square foot space, designed by award-winning architect Toshiko Mori, is the perfect environment to showcase works by artists such as Liu Wei, José Dávila and David Claerbout.

*British-born Sean Kelly represents established and mid-career artists as well as a new generation of talented contemporary names. He has always been committed to artists who challenge the traditional boundaries of art practice. Having worked as a curator, he works closely with cultural institutions, coordinating numerous exhibitions in international museums.*

**Artfairmag:** Sean Kelly, you are the head of a 22,000 square foot contemporary art gallery in New York. Can you tell us more about your background and how you got there?

**Sean Kelly:** I was born in England and began my career in the art world as an artist and then as a museum curator. Subsequently, I went on to become the Director of Visual Arts for the Bath International Arts Festival, England and founded and directed Artsite, a site-specific exhibition program in Bath, England, before relocating to New York in 1988/89.

**Artfairmag:** Sean Kelly Gallery seems to have no boundaries in what it presents. It ranges from painting to edgy performance, sculpture to a wide variety of mixed-media. What would you say is the DNA of the gallery?

**S. K.:** The Gallery has been internationally acknowledged for its diverse, academically driven program and highly regarded roster of artists. We've always been interested in artists that are pushing the boundaries of their work, both intellectually and materially.

At the core of the gallery's program is our focus on values, culture, and art itself. These ideas are evinced through the gallery's Collect Wisely platform. Launched in 2018, Collect Wisely is an overarching advertising and social media campaign. The mainstay of the initiative is the Collect Wisely Podcast, which features interviews with collectors discussing art, artists, connoisseurship and focuses on

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a passion for collecting. The newest development in the campaign is The Artist Audio Experience. Encouraging visitors to slow down and pay closer attention to art, The Artist Audio Experience provides unique access to the voice of the artist. To enhance the viewing and collecting experience, each artwork in our exhibitions are accompanied by a unique audio recording of the artist talking about each specific artwork. Collect Wisely is an initiative to ensure galleries are places of conversation and education, as well as commerce.

**Artfairmag:** Many of the artists you represent are loyal to Sean Kelly Gallery. You have been working with some of them, such as Marina Abramović, Rebecca Horn, Callum Innes or Joseph Kosuth, for over 25 years. What kind of relationship do you develop with them?

**S.K.:** The loyalty of our artists is very much reciprocal, we work to nurture and grow their careers resulting in many years of collaboration and engagement. The gallery is very much a family, both literally and figuratively. Both of my children, Lauren and Thomas have been with the gallery for many years and are now Partners. I think this give us a unique relationship with the artists we work with.

**Artfairmag:** You have always worked hand in hand with cultural institutions by coordinating hundreds of exhibitions at renowned museums like the MoMA in New York, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, or the Tate Gallery in London, to name but a few. Can you explain this practice, which goes beyond being an art dealer?

**S.K.:** I believe my background as a curator influences this aspect of the gallery's work. One of the objectives of the gallery is to introduce and educate a wider audience about our artists, with museum exhibitions and of course acquisitions we're able to reach a much larger public.

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**Artfairmag:** What about art fairs? Sean Kelly Gallery used to participate in many art fairs around the world. After this long hiatus due to Covid-19, will you continue as before? Do you think that fairs will remain at the heart of the business model of international art galleries?

**S.K.:** The inability to visit art galleries and travel for fairs and biennials certainly changed the way we did business. It also brought into focus how much collectors genuinely love pursuing their passion for art and their collections. As the pandemic situation improves and travel becomes viable again, I think we'll see a lot of pent-up interest and desire to visit galleries and art fairs. It's about making personal connections, visiting exhibitions, and standing face to face with a work of art, collectors have missed that. However, there is no question that the art world has been changed and that we must embrace a hybrid future of in person and digital presentations.

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**Artfairmag:** Talking about this hiatus, has the closure of galleries and the cancellation of art fairs led you to rethink your job, in particular with the massive use of digital tools?

**S.K.:** There is now so much more sophisticated digital access and understanding of how to present content. We expanded the gallery's programming on social media and have continued to make much of our content available online through artist videos. Much of the digital programming that has evolved during COVID is here to stay, however, nothing replaces being able to view art in person.

**Artfairmag:** To conclude this interview, could you present us an artwork – which may or may not come from your gallery – that is special to you?

**S.K.:** For me Duchamp's work and attitude are a constant inspiration. He changed the face of the art world, and we now live in his space. I suppose in a way it's cheating, but Boîte en Valise contains almost his entire oeuvre, which for me is a brilliant concept beautifully executed and gives one multiple works on a miniature scale.