

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.



# REMARKABLE WOMEN OF THE ARTS



## Leila Heller on becoming an art dealer



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Interview with **Leila Heller**, Founder and President of **Leila Heller Gallery** that specializes in representing artists from the Middle East, Central Asia, Southeast Asia and Turkey. We asked Leila about becoming an art dealer, her take on art fairs and the artists she represents and collects.

**galleryIntell: When did you first get involved with the art world and why did you decide to start your own gallery?**

**Leila Heller:** After studying art history at Brown University, and then receiving a Master's degree from the Sotheby's institute in London and a second Master's degree in Art History and Museum Management from George Washington University, I began working in several museums, but realized how much I enjoyed visiting artists' studios and working directly with them. This was during the early 80's, which was a vibrant and exciting time in the New York City art world. I hung out with many artists both at clubs and various openings around the city. All of this led to my decision to open my own gallery in 1982.



**Watch our [video interview with Leila Heller](#) during the Armory Show 2013.**

**GI: Who was the first artist you signed to represent and how did you go about putting together your first roster?**

**LH:** The first artist I signed up was **Leopoldo Maier**, an Argentinian artist living in New York City and his work was very conceptual. He had a gas operated, burning typewriter in the middle of the gallery that represented the censorship of writers and the burning of books against the regime in Argentina. This first show was reviewed by all of the major art magazines and after that, my openings on the Upper East Side became happenings. My first roster of artists consisted of **Benjamin Lira**, **Marta Minujin**, **Dan Witz**, **Tom Woodruff**, and **Y.Z. Kami** and **Charles Hossein Zenderoudi** both of whom lived in Paris at the time.



**GI: What were the challenges when you just started introducing artists from the Middle East to a Western Audience?**



Rachel Lee Hovnanian's "Mud Pie" – Private viewing and dinner hosted by Leila Heller Gallery

**LH:** In New York during the 80's there was no interest in artists from the Middle East and their works wouldn't sell. Now that the world is much more globalized, due to the onset of the internet and international art fairs and auctions, boundaries in interest based on countries and regions are disappearing. If the art is good, it can sell anywhere.

**GI: What are the thematic trends in the Middle Eastern Art? Are artists dealing**

**primarily with the religious, political and social themes, or are there different subjects they are exploring?**

**LH:** Like artists from any other country, artists from the Middle East explore all types of themes, from portraiture to abstraction. There is no particular trend that they follow just because they are from the Middle East

**GI: How have the art fairs changed the standard gallery business model?**

**LH:** Art fairs are happenings and offer amazing events via their VIP programs, including dinners, lectures, auxiliary shows, auction previews and private museum and collection visits. Collectors love to travel to all over the world to different art fairs and in one weekend, they are given the opportunity to preview 200 galleries under just one roof, rather than going to individual galleries. I myself travel to not only the ten art fairs that my gallery participates in, but to many others as it is a place that brings together collectors, curators, writers and artists.

**GI: What is your least favorite trend that you've noticed at art fairs this year?**

**LH:** I appreciate booths that are carefully curated and maintain the integrity of the artists, as if it was a museum show, opposed to booths that have only commercial aims in mind and try to hang as many paintings together which have nothing to do with one another just for the purpose of sales.



Opening reception for Ran Hwang: Transition at Leila Heller Gallery

**GI: Who are the artists in your private collection?**

**LH:** The artists in my collection range from **Andy Warhol, Damien Hirst, Marilyn Minter, Takashi Murakami, Alexander Calder, Illya Bolotowsky, to Rachel Hovnanian, Ike Ude, Ran Hwang, Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, Y.Z. Kami, Shirin Neshat, Hadieh Shafie, Martin Saar, Shiva Ahmadi, Poursan Jinchi, Christopher Makos** and many more.

**GI: If you could have any work of art regardless of price or availability what that would be?**

**LH:** If I could have work by any artist it would be Mondrian. I wrote my college thesis on him and he inspired me in my own painting.

**GI: Your one practical advice to a new collector?**

**LH:** My advice is to only buy if you fall in love with a particular piece and it speaks to you, not just because it is trendy.

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