

Leila Heller Q&A

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Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller received a B.A. from Brown University, and a Masters degree from the Sotheby's Institute in London, and a second Masters degree in Art History and Museum Management from George Washington University. During her Masters in Washington D.C, she worked at the Hirshhorn Museum until moving to New York to work at the Guggenheim Museum.

In 1982, she opened Leila Taghinia-Milani Gallery on the Upper East Side of New York, exhibiting established Western artists, while giving exposure to emerging artists from the Middle East. In the 90's, Heller shifted her focus solely to the secondary market placing major modern and contemporary masters in top collections worldwide and participating international art fairs. In 2003, Heller re-opened her gallery presenting an active exhibition schedule, and inviting a range of respected international curators to organize shows pairing emerging artists with Modern and Contemporary Masters.

In 2011, she expanded her gallery under the name Leila Heller Gallery, to a ground floor space in Chelsea. The gallery is dedicated to promoting emerging and established artists from America, Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia. The gallery continues to focus on dealing in contemporary and modern masters.

Q&A

Do you remember the first work of art you purchased? How did that evolve into a habit of collecting?

When I was growing up my mother was an avid art collector and I always enjoyed going with her to galleries and art fairs. I loved helping her and learning from her about art. The first piece of art that I ever bought for myself was when I was studying painting and art in college at Brown University and RISD. I was fascinated by the work of a fellow student, Robin Perl, whose easel was always next to mine. I ended up purchasing all her works when we graduated and continued to buy her work after we both had moved to New York. I was so enthralled by the encaustic painting process she used. Unfortunately, she changed professions because it was, and always will be, very hard to make it as an artist in New York. I still cherish her works very much and they inspired my interest in this painting method, which my artist, Rachel Lee Hovnanian, frequently uses. I hope that when I retire, I will learn to paint like that, as I am a frustrated painter myself.

What do you think about selling art on line?

I think that it is certainly the way of the future. More and more we are seeing sites that allow for very successful online art sales. One of my gallery's directors, Jessica Davidson, is very savvy when it comes to online art commerce platforms, such as 60inches, Artsy, Paddle 8, 1stDibs, Artspace, etc. Since our gallery's clients are extraordinarily international, the ability to present works over the internet has allowed the gallery to make many sales online to people abroad. All of these platforms allow our clients who may be overseas to not only view what is for sale, but to stay connected with what is happening and on view at the gallery.

How has Middle Eastern art affected the more NY-Euro-centric market?

I represent artists from all over the world, however Middle Eastern art is certainly one of my niches. For the last 30 years, I have nurtured artists from that part of the world in New York and I have been very successful at placing my artists in major museums around America, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, Detroit Institute of Arts, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MoCA).

Where is a good starting point for a collector that has never bought contemporary Middle Eastern art before?

My advice to those collectors looking to purchase contemporary Middle Eastern art for the first time is to look into artists who are already in major museums worldwide. These institutions will have put a lot of thought and research into their selections, and I think museums with collections to look at include the Tate, the British Museum, Centre Pompidou, the Metropolitan Museum, LACMA and MoCA.

Who do you think is the strongest emerging Iranian and Turkish artist?

That is a very loaded question, and I truly don't think I could pick one artist. I don't play favorites amongst my artists. All of my artists have been very thoughtfully chosen, and if you look at the collections they are in, you can see that they are all great. It would just be too hard to choose.

Do you think that eventually selling art on line will make galleries obsolete?

Absolutely not, both online selling and the gallery have their place. There will always be some people who will never buy a work of art unless they can see it and feel it in person. Also, there is really no way that a work priced above \$1 Million will sell online, unless someone has seen it in person. We do use the internet to show works in that category to perspective clients, but never have made a sale of that caliber unless a client has seen the artwork in person. They can see a work online, and put it on-hold subject to approval, but that means that someone, be that the buyer or a curator, will fly to come see the work themselves before the final sales transaction.

How do you think people that sell art on line can maintain relationships with their clients and build trust?

One's reputation is the key element for maintaining relationships with clients and building trust. If your clients are consistently happy with the works they see, that the condition reports and provenance records are accurate, and are pleased with your transactions, they will keep coming back and expand your client base.

What is your advice for buying emerging artists?

I will speak from my own personal experience, which is that the best way to start is to follow your gut feeling about a piece or an artist. If they are emerging, then the price level shouldn't be too high, and you should be sure that the gallery the artist is coming from is known for promoting their artists to higher levels. If you know that you love the piece, and the artist is not represented by a gallery, you can do your own research to see if they have won any prizes, or been in any biennials or group shows.

What has been your proudest achievement as a dealer over the span of your career?

My proudest achievement over the years has been nurturing my artists and helping to launch their careers and them becoming the artists they are today. Also, I feel very proud that I have helped them all to be placed in museums. For me, that is really the biggest thrill of it all.

What mistake became a positive experience for you?

I have had many instances of missed opportunities. I remember my biggest mistake was when Tony Shafrazi offered me 10 Keith Haring drawings for \$100 each. Instead, I chose to have one of his artists do a portrait of me, I guess that was a big price to pay for vanity!