

“Houston Offers a Wonderful Reprieve For Artists”: Gallery Chat with Robert McClain, Leading Art Dealer in Houston

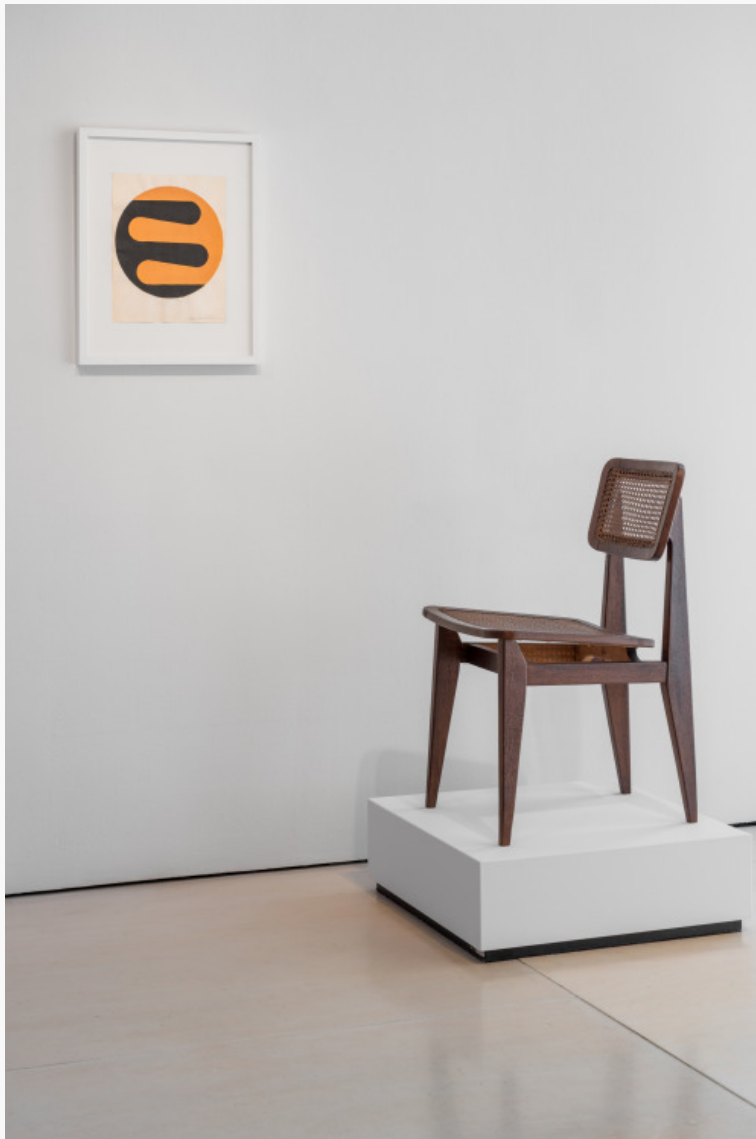
By Morgan Fletcher



Robert McClain in front of Gisela Colon, Ultra Spheroid Glo-Pod (Iridescent Lilac), 2015, blow-molded acrylic.

Robert McClain has spent the last 35 years waking up to the challenges and joys as an art dealer. He opened his namesake gallery in Houston, Texas in 1980, from which he shows museum-quality modern and contemporary art by twentieth-century masters (such as Alex Katz, Larry Bell and Louise Nevelson), alongside groundbreaking works by a younger, and increasingly international, generation of artists including those in the arts collective Bruce High Quality Foundation, Henrique Oliveira, Katsumi Hayakawa and Gisela Colon.

The gallery's group exhibitions often explore themes relevant to art history, such as the recent group show "re:construction"—which tackles the age old form-and-function debate—and "A Sun That Never Sets," which surveyed the way different artists depict landscapes in painting.



Installation view of "re:construction," 2018. Photo by Peter Molick Photography.



Christian Eckart, Craquelure Detail Painting #1, 2017, 23 karat gold leaf on birch panel and unique aluminum extrusion. Photo by Peter Molick Photography.

We spoke with McClain about the unique advantages of living outside an international art city, the “gentleman” dealers who influenced his work, his top tips for budding art collectors, and more.

How did you become an art dealer?

My original training was in writing and journalism, which prepared me to be an art dealer. The notions of investigation and trying to understand situations in context were probably the greatest skill set that’s helped me become successful. Originally, I started out as a print dealer, and it evolved from there as I started meeting artists whose works I admired and wanted to represent.



Installation view of "Henrique Oliveira," 2015. Photo by Nash Baker.

How has being outside of the major art cities shaped your approach to your work?

We like to think of Houston as being an art center, but it's a far cry comparatively to major art centers such as New York and L.A., which has had a big impact on the way I've viewed my gallery, what it means to be an art dealer, and how I've functioned in the overall landscape.

How so?

Being outside provides a bit of distance. You're not as caught up with the insider chatter, which can be distracting. It's allowed me to work with many different artists and dealers. If you're a New York dealer, you have a defined set of artists you can work with. We've had the opportunity to take a pluralistic approach, to look at artists and dealers whom we like. That's allowed us a broad view of the art world, which has kept things fresh and interesting.



Louise Bourgeois, Installation at Hermann Park, Houston, TX, 2014. Photo courtesy Weingarten Art Group.

How do the artists respond to showing in Houston?

One of the wonderful things that happens for many artists when they come to Houston is that they're amazed that the experience is so personal. When we did Julian Schnabel's exhibition in 2006, Julian hadn't been back since he graduated from the University of Houston—and had his very first museum show at the Contemporary Arts Museum—in 1975. We organized small dinners. It was very intimate. All the museum people and collectors were so available to him. He really enjoyed himself and said, "You know, this is the way it should be everywhere—real conversations about art and about who we are."

Houston offers a wonderful reprieve for a lot of artists. Collectors appreciate when artists decide to show here. They invite them to be part of our community. I feel fortunate that my staff likes sharing ideas with people who may not be initiated into the art world; they are great educators. Being outside of the art centers, our greatest gift is that we get a chance to work with collectors of all types and, in many cases, be part of building their collections from the very beginning. That said, Houston has a legacy of



Installation view of "Katsumi Hayakawa: Paper Works," 2015. Photo by Nash Baker.

What do you think influences the gallery's/your aesthetic taste?

My father was career military, and so I grew up all over, I was raised by a Japanese stepmother. When I think about where my initial sense of aesthetics comes from, I remember her taking me to Kabuki theater when I was 6, seeing Buddhist and Shinto shrines, and experiencing a tea ceremony.

My stepmother was very philosophical, everything was a metaphor in some way. I remember her vegetable garden. She had one single tomato plant that was remarkable, full of all these wonderful tomatoes. I asked her, "Why don't you plant ten tomato plants and have more tomatoes?" She said, "Well, this is the difference between the Japanese way and the American way. For Americans, the more the better, but in Japan the idea is that you have one plant and you devote yourself entirely to that one plant. You make it the most abundant single plant that you can." It was remarkable how many lush wonderful tomatoes she produced from that single plant. And that's how I think of my single gallery here.



One of the people I spent time with when I started out was the late New-York-City-based art gallery owner Tibor de Nagy. Tibor was what I would like to call a “gentleman art dealer,” which is about taking the time to really talk to people about the artists and the art. I remember his sense of graciousness and the wealth of information he had, as well as the love and admiration he had for art and his artists.

David Nash, of the ADAA gallery Mitchell-Innes & Nash, is of the same mold—a true scholar, loves art. He functions within the world of commerce, but he also brings something else that is genteel, thoughtful, and generous.

I like to think that this approach is alive and well in Houston, that we treat our artists and collectors that way. At the end of the day, I feel like I’m making a contribution to the community, and for me that brings a certain value that goes beyond closing a deal.



Installation view of “Celestial,” 2013. Photo by Nash Baker.

What advice would you give to aspiring dealers?

I did it the hard way. I never worked for another dealer or an auction house. I advise up-and-coming dealers to pick out the galleries and programs that they admire and work for them—to gain insight and season themselves before they start their own project. These days the opportunities for the lone individual who doesn’t have enormous resources to become an art dealer...well, that’s a very tall order...



Installation view of "The Bruce High Quality Foundation: Isles of the Dead," 2014. Photo by Nash Baker.

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