

CONVERSATIONS WITH MIKE MILKEN



Larry Gagosian
Founder, Gagosian

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Courtesy Gagosian.

Mike Milken: Larry, thank you for joining me today.

Larry Gagosian: Nice to be with you, Mike.

We both were born in Los Angeles, I was the San Fernando Valley boy. You did spend some time at the same high school I did, even though we didn't know each other in high school. I really think back to the time that I came back in 1965 during the summer to work in L.A. from Berkeley. The Free Speech Movement was over and the Watts Riots occurred. For me Larry, it changed my life when I met this young African American man who told me no one would ever loan him money because of his race. I went back to Berkeley and changed my major to finance, and the rest is history.

Art plays an important role during a crisis. Are there times in history that you think there are iconic paintings, iconic photos or things where people capture the spirit and you did not have to have to have any captions. By just looking at it, you could capture the spirit. Anything in history that comes to mind?

Photography obviously is the most vivid way of capturing history. Going back to photographs that were taken during the Civil War, or those that were taken during

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity and readability.

World War I, those taken during the Battle of Dunkirk, I think photography is so immediate and irrefutable in the message it conveys. It's is a kind of real-time medium. With painting, in my opinion, I think the artist needs some time to reflect because sometimes your first reaction, for lack of a better way, is a bit kneejerk and maybe too simplistic. As an artist you take it in, you process it, and maybe not consciously even, try to depict some horrible event that happened or what's been going on with civil unrest; it's filtered through your other experiences and your craft as an artist. I think that's the most meaningful in terms of painting. Picasso painting an amazing painting that was in response to a Korean War, which not that many people remember. It's a very unusual

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Picasso because it's very literal. You see soldiers lined up with long rifles. I don't want to misspeak, but I think it came from a Goya painting that referenced a Spanish war and he kind of borrowed the imagery from the Goya, if I'm not mistaken and kind of put it into the present context. Picasso was not a political painter. He had very strong political views, particularly in terms of what was going on in Spain, but he wasn't what I would say is a political painter. Over the years, many great artists have dealt with the tragedies and the turmoil of the time they lived in.

So Larry, one of the things you said really struck a chord with me. It was in the early eighties and I had met Simon Wiesenthal in Vienna and they were going to build a Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, the Wiesenthal Museum. I had mentioned to Rabbi Hier, who was in charge of the project, if he's going to tell the story of the Holocaust, let's talk about prejudice and respond to inhumanities in the world. I know as this period of time, with the coronavirus and with the challenges in Minneapolis and the resulting effects of it and response with Black Lives Matter and inclusion and a reevaluation, that I am sure that artists will find a way to capture this for us.

I'm sure they will. I'm sure they will. That'll be meaningful in many cases.

I know you interact with so many artists. Have you had any discussions with them since the coronavirus started?

I haven't physically visited with any artists. I've been pretty strict about it, my protocol and isolation. But I've talked to many of the artists that I represent and not so much about, to be honest with you, not so much about how they felt about what was going on

– that would be part of the conversation – but just how are they feeling? What's their mood? Are they working? Artists are really well equipped for this moment. For obvious reasons, they tend to work in isolation. I mean, some artists have studio assistants, but most artists work by themselves. This is not a shock to their daily routine in that they go to a studio and try to work. I think for many of them, I wouldn't say it's an escape because they don't look at their art as an escape, but I think it concentrates them in a particular way knowing that they don't really have access to the broader world in the same way that we need. Things may have shut down, but my job as a dealer representing these incredible artists, they need income. They have expenses, they have kids in school. I take it as a very serious responsibility to keep the ball rolling, not just for the benefit of my business, but also for the artists that depend on me for their livelihood.

I always was looking for that entrepreneur. Who am I going to back financially? Who has a vision of a new industry, whether it was mobile communications, whether it was cable that very few people believed in, but who had viewed the world differently, whether it was in a resort hotel or whether it was a different way of building homes. When I look back at the honor I had of financing thousands of companies, it was really that I did a good job identifying that individual and that individual's ability to communicate their vision to their employees and to investors. When I think of your career, the amazing ability you've had to look at new artists, young artists. Take us for a moment from this young student at UCLA that brave the Watts Riots to see with his own eyes, to deciding that art was your career.

“I have a pretty good eye for art. I go with my gut and I go with what really turns me on. And if it turns me on, very often there'll be an audience for it. To me, it's still one of the most exciting things in my business – encountering a new artist, a young artist, somebody I wasn't familiar with that I think has exceptional talent.”

I didn't have a career path when I graduated from UCLA, I graduated and I didn't have a lot of drive. I didn't have a lot of ambition. It took me six years from beginning to end because I took hiatus a couple of times. But I got my diploma. I started parking cars for a living. That's how I made a living, I was parking cars in Westwood Village and making enough money to get by. I saw somebody selling posters on the sidewalk and I said, 'wow, maybe I could sell posters?' So I basically found out where this guy bought his posters and I kind of copied his business. My family didn't collect art. We didn't go to museums. I didn't come from that kind of cultural background. I wish I had. I was an English major. I didn't study business or history. But luckily, and I mean lucky with a capital L, I started selling posters and I found out I was a decent salesman. I never thought of myself as a salesman, but I would sell a lot of posters. Then I got a little frame shop so I could get off the sidewalk.

Everything went the right way and it snowballed. I remember my first trip to New York was to go to an artist's studio. I'd never been to New York. I fell in love with New York. I was just smitten. As soon as I hit the sidewalk, I was smitten. So New York and art became fused at that moment in my life.

What about identifying those artists? You've got a feeling that it's going to connect to someone else.

Well, I really don't think about it connecting so much to someone else, to be honest with you. The main criteria for me is do I think it's significant? Do I think it's interesting? Do I

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think it's innovative? Is it not a rehash of what some other artist did? Usually if I like it, that means I want to buy it. If I don't want to buy something in the studio, that's usually a bad sign for me personally. I have a pretty good eye for art and I think I'm more often right than wrong. I go with my gut and I go with what really turns me on. If it turns me on, very often there'll be an audience for it.

To me it's still one of the most exciting

things in my business – encountering a new artist, a young artist, somebody I wasn't familiar with that I think has exceptional talent. It doesn't come along every day.

Just give you a quick example. I was living in my loft in New York and a friend of mine, Barbara Kruger, who taught at UCLA for many years, is a terrific artist and a great friend. She was in a group show in a gallery and she says, 'Larry, would you mind walking over?' I walked over there to see Barbara's work. Then in the next room I saw these paintings, I think there were five of them if I'm not mistaken. And Mike, my hair stood up. I mean I got goosebumps. It was that exciting and impactful. Annina Nosei, who happened to own the gallery that had this group show, she came out to greet me. I said, 'Annina, this is unbelievable. Who is this artist?' She says 'Jean-Michel Basquiat; you haven't heard of him?' I said, no; I thought it was some old French guy. I bought three and I walked into her office and there was Jean-Michel Basquiat, and we became friends. I've always enjoyed the company of artists, particularly talented ones.

How do you make a decision on where to put one of your galleries and how do you search out artists throughout the world, not just in the United States?

That's a good question, Mike. I mean, some of my choices for cities are kind of obvious. London is the capital for art in Europe. Now I have three galleries in London and two galleries in Paris, a gallery in Rome, and one gallery in Geneva. We just got a new building

in Athens, Greece. We were the first Western galleries, I think, to open in Hong Kong. Hong Kong has been absolutely game changing for my business because we'll be the gateway to Asia for some time in terms of commerce and banking and finance. Most of the big art collectors in Asia come through Hong Kong to transact. So that's been a great platform for us. And then LA: when I moved to New York I pretty much closed my gallery in LA because I couldn't really handle having two galleries. I didn't have the wherewithal to do that at that moment. But then when I felt more confident about my business, I wanted to open a gallery in LA and I opened on Cañon Drive in Beverly Hills at Richard Meyer Designs. A beautiful, beautiful gallery – God that's well over 20 years ago. It's challenging every day in different ways, but somehow it suits me to have this kind of a business.

One of the things I've seen about your galleries around the world is they themselves are an expression. What is the environment you're seeing the art in? What is the light? In many ways they're a piece of artwork themselves. How much are you involved in the structure of the gallery?

I'm quite involved. Obviously I'm not an architect. I'm not involved with that level, but I do pick architects and I'm very involved in the design of the gallery. It's important for painters particularly, and sculptors, to have a space that has good light has, good volumes and is physically attractive to show their work. It's a retail business. People come in there to buy art and the experience they have, the attractiveness of the space [is important]. You can take the same art and put it in an awkward location and doesn't have good light. That same art may look totally different and won't be as compelling for the public and for the collector. In Paris, it took me two to three years to find space. In Rome, it took me at two years. I looked at so many spaces to get the right space, right location.

How did the idea of this art gallery get created?

It's largely out of necessity. We had to figure out a way to keep our artists in the public eye and make sales. We've come up with various online strategies and we've done extremely well. All the artists that we were going to show during this period of time, their shows about canceled, which is very frustrating and very costly for that artist. When things get back to normal, whenever that is, hopefully soon, a lot of these online strategies will stay part of our business.

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One of your artists is going to be on the cover of Time magazine.

Titus Kaphar is really talented artist and very much responding to what's going on right now. The cover of Time magazine depicts a black woman holding her baby, and the baby has been removed from the painting. It's a powerful expression of loss. He gave a talk at this conference for about half an hour, and I've never seen an artist get up and hold an audience that effectively and in such a moving way. He's a great artist and we're going to be showing his work in New York in September. I think things should be open enough to have an exhibition by then.

Larry, thank you for joining me today. I always learn a great deal when I speak to you about art and life.

Thank you, Mike. Great, great to spend some time with you today.
