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“How Hollywood Power Players Jump Through Hoops to Score a Unique Piece of Art”

by Degen Pener

Not long after they missed the preview for a fall 2015 exhibit at L.A. gallery Various Small Fires, Charlie Corwin, co-CEO of Endemol Shine North America, and his wife, Olivia, regretted it. The first solo exhibition of painter Joshua Nathanson saw his 13 works — super-flat surfaces of people in cartoonish imagery — all presold to collectors before the opening. Nathanson, 39, has two international solo shows coming up, one at Takashi Murakami’s KaiKai Kiki Gallery in Tokyo; among those who bought his works from the fall show were CAA’s Joel Lubin, former UPN chief Dean Valentine and Murakami himself.

“I have a philistine rule for buying art, which is, if it emotionally moves me,” says Corwin. He and Olivia saw Nathanson’s work with their art adviser, Sarah Jane Bruce, a week after the opening. “I consider market conditions and resale values and whether an artist is on his way up, and then I throw all that out and go with my gut. These pieces are uplifting, which is unusual for me to say because I’m a fairly cynical person.”

So the Corwins asked if they could commission Nathanson to do an additional painting — a practice on the rise among industry collectors, says Veronica Fernandez of Fine Art Advising Services, who recently has coordinated a commission for Mandeville Films founder David Hoberman (a sculpture by L.A. artist Amanda Ross-Ho) and is in the process of commissioning a wall drawing by Chicago-based artist Tony Lewis for an exec at a major studio.



Sue Naegle and Max Jansons were photographed Jan. 14 at Naegle’s Ojai, Calif., home.

Photographed by Noah Webb

Still, commissions are not commonplace, nor are they always a simple solution to supply scarcity. “You can give artists some parameters, but you cannot tell them exactly what to do,” says Lisa Schiff of Schiff Fine Art. “A lot of discussions about commissions stop because of collectors’ fears that they won’t get what they wanted.” Artists may balk at creating a piece to, say, match a sofa, says Joshua Roth, head of UTA’s artist division (he has commissioned works by Jim Shaw and Alex Israel): “A truly great artist isn’t a gun for hire.” Esther Kim Varet, the gallerist behind Various Small Fires, often doesn’t forward commission requests to artists. “No artist wants to feel like they are a mail-order catalog,” she says.

For dealers, a commission can mean extra work for not much extra money, as these pieces typically aren’t priced significantly higher than already completed ones. There are contracts involved, some complicated (one provided to THR runs 12 pages). Having a previous relationship can help. “If the artist likes you (or your adviser) and respects the collection you’ve assembled, they’ll probably say yes or, at the very least, think about it,” says Fernandez. “More established artists can sometimes take years to say yes.”

Three years ago, producer Sue Naegle, former

entertainment president of HBO, commissioned three paintings by artist Max Jansons. The idea came from her architects, Susan Lanier and Paul Lubowicki, who were converting a barn on the property at Naegle's second home in Ojai, Calif.; they suggested gracing three interior sliding doors with original art. "One of my ideas was to have three different artists," recalls her art adviser Nancy Chaikin. Naegle instead suggested one — Jansons (who happens to be married to Chaikin). "During the process, I really wanted her to come and see if she was getting what she wanted," recalls Chaikin. "She said no. I think it's indicative of what she does in her work. She has to have faith in writers and directors and believe in people."

Hoberman sought the Ross-Ho piece after a decade of collecting the artist's work. The more-than-6-foot-tall sculpture of a torso with a cascade of women's underwear in black, white and gray — part of a show last summer at downtown L.A. gallery Francois Ghebaly — had sold before Hoberman (who saw an emailed image) fell in love with it. Fernandez spoke to the gallery, he recalls, "and Amanda [Ross-Ho] came back and said, yes, she's interested in making the sculpture with the underwear in a rainbow of colors, which I thought was great because I love color." An uncommon agreement was reached: Hoberman paid the costs of fabricating the work. If he decided not to buy it, Ross-Ho's gallery could sell it, and if it sold, Hoberman would get reimbursed — but in the end, the pact was moot. "Partly because of that piece I ended up turning my garage into a gallery," says Hoberman. "It's so striking, yet it has a lot of humor to it."

As for the Corwins, they will be getting their Nathanson — thanks to dogged effort on the part of Bruce (whose clients also include writer-producer Lee Eisenberg). "Sarah Jane asked me not only once but four times," recalls Various Small Fires' Varet. Nathanson appreciates that the Corwins

"are going to put it up somewhere and will live with it," he says. "A lot of times when people buy, it's to store pieces or flip them."

The Corwins will hang the piece in their Venice home ("We have one wall left," says Charlie); they put few strictures on the commission other than to say they wanted a painting in keeping with the exhibit they admired and to specify an approximate size. "I'm not the type of person that wants to customize too much," says Charlie. "Like if I go into a really fancy restaurant and order something and they ask me how I'd like it done, I usually say whatever the chef prefers. That's usually going to be the best."