

Translated from Hebrew

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"People today show off their money and not the value of the artwork"

A visit to Berlin with Doron Sebbag on the occasion of a new exhibition of works from his collection in corporation with the Daimler Contemporary Art Collection provides a glimpse at the International art market from his perspective. In an exclusive interview for "Globes" he says " I am no longer interested in demonstrating power."

"We're back to 2008," says Doron Sebbag and points at the thick-belly catalogues by the largest auction houses in the world, which are laid out on the conference table in his office. Along with the artworks that are up for sale in October in London and November in New-York, Christie's, Sotheby's and Philips have invested in special editions for collectors, which include interviews, in depth articles and quiet some gossip, all adding temptation to the main course.

Is there money to spend again? The rumor has it that the economic breakdown is yet continuing.

"Yes, there is money. There is a lot of money and people are buying art in the same manner as before the economic crisis."

Sebbag himself- the owner of the company O.R.S Ltd. and one of the largest art collectors in Israel, is only willing to share that he will be visiting New-York, but it is unknown if he will be attending any of the auction houses salesrooms. He follows each oscillation in the market with a discerning eye, but as for his buying decisions he is completely discrete. As is everyone else by the way. Even prior to the emergence of the economic breakdown, he has argued, not once, that the prices of art are too excessive. But he has found a way and didn't quit purchasing Israeli and international art.

A week ago he has returned from the FIAC art fair in Paris as well as from an opening of an exhibition in Berlin, which incorporates works from his own collection and works from the Daimler collection. The exhibition is taking place in the Daimler contemporary art gallery space in central Berlin and a first of its kind for the Doron Sebbag Art Collection.

Would you consider this achievement as the peak point for you as a collector?

"Of course I am proud and excited," he says at the opening eve. "It's an accomplishment and recognition of the quality of the collection but it is mainly an achievement for Israeli art, being presented in such a central place, in a non- commercial space which is open to the public without

an admission fee. Israeli Art that is presented alongside International art and does not fall short of it.

In the first week of the opening, more than 1000 people have already visited, Daimler reported, and some 500 people showed up during the festive opening night. There is no doubt that by the end of the exhibition in March 2013 the works of Sigalit Landau, Michal Rovner, Ilit Azoulay, Guy Zagursky and many others will receive a significant and important exposure.

Skipping between Artists

The Sebbag Collection, as mentioned before, is not dedicated only to Israeli art, and for this he is proud. It is difficult to recognize, at first glance at the exhibition, whose works belong to who's collection.

Only upon a more detailed contemplation one can see clearly the polite minimalism of the Daimler collection versus the more extreme works owned by the Doron Sebbag Collection, which are more provocative and difficult, made from organic materials, such as of a sculpture of a dead body hung from a ceiling by Sigalit Landau, the dead-flies canvas by Damien Hirst, and the appearance of a naked body in a revealing position by Marlene Dumas and more.

"I always look for the zeitgeist and try to identify the change," he says during a conversation in Berlin in a dialogue during one of his visits to the artists' studios. "It been a long time since a significant change was made, like the one made by the Impressionists. Perhaps the abstract came close, but not in the same scale."

Sebbag operates diligently in the art market. He never misses an opportunity to get updated, visiting important exhibitions and the leading art fairs in the world. He is in constant contact with art galleries and artists. He arrived at Berlin prior to the exhibition and already had a long series of back to back meetings. He began his day with a private tour at one of the most important galleries in town and continued to the studios of some of the most prominent artists in the Berlin art scene today.

He quietly and with complete understanding, almost without words consults Dana Golan Miller, the collections' curator, while exiting and sweeping into the art scene his in-laws, the businessman Hazi Batzalel and his wife Orit.

The doors open for him, he is the well-known and respected collector feeling comfortable in this arena as if his own.

"Art collectors must purchase art. It is a passion that can cause great suffering, but simultaneously it is also the origin of great happiness," Golan Miller, the curator, quotes Samuel Keller saying on the character of an art collector. "Two decades of art collecting is a period of time that allows retrospective reference to the collections character and the attempt of mapping

it," she writes in the exhibition catalogue "Accelerating Towards Apocalypse" which was exhibited in the Givon Art Forum space last summer.

The exhibition in Berlin is based on the visit of the curator of the Daimler Collection at this exhibition, but her presentation of it created a completely different framework for it. Sebbag, did not intervene in the curating choices- not in the exhibition that was curated in Israel by Tal Yahas and not in the exhibition curated by Renate Wiehager in Daimler. It seems that for him the perspective of the external curator is an opportunity for new excitement. Like a caress of the collection by foreign excited hands. His solidarity with the collection seems to be wholesome.

Do you sell works from the collection or do you only purchase?

"I never sell works by Israeli artists and works which I have purchased through the artists. The relationship between a collector and an artist is very fragile. If I sell works which I have purchased through the artists he will be very offended, it's as if I don't love him anymore."

But you do sell other works?

"Sometimes I sell works which I have purchased at an auction house sale, and even then it has happened to me that the artist became angry with me when he found out I sold his work- even though I have not bought it from him directly or from the gallery that represents him.

How did you begin collecting art?

"I always loved art. When I was a teenager I would buy posters of exhibitions. In 1988, Adam Baruch raised funds for the Venice Biennale which he curated, and then gained my support to sponsor the gallery in Bugrashov. Adam Baruch asked me 'and what will you do with your free time?' at first it sounded awkward to me. What is leisure time, but then I got carried away".

Baruch's plan, if there was such, was successful beyond expectations. "The first work that I really purchased was 'the Swimmer' by Dganit Berst, following her lecture at the gallery. After this I decided to study Art History and following a fortuitous meeting with Moti Omer (may he rest in peace), I transferred to the Masters Art History program. I wrote my Thesis on Degas as a collector. He was very affluent and collected French art from the 18th century through the beginning of the 20th century."

When did you become a "serious art collector"- with a stored and documented collection, full time curator, and traveling the world in search of art?

"I think in the year 1992-93 the collection began to grow. A renowned and much respected gallery owner told me 'Doron do not buy with such obsession, you must check more in depth. What will you do with it? How will you store it?' Today I see that the rate of my purchases has decreased, also because it is harder to excite me."

As time passed his taste as a collector molded as well. During the last several years it seems that his taste became more distinguished and extreme, perhaps it is the result of needing excitement. Works that are more difficult and less aesthetic, those that need space and regular maintenance.

Are you thinking about getting a permanent exhibition space for the collection?

"This is a task for oligarchs. Such a space requires an enormous effort. A location, conditions, air conditioning, maintenance and I am not such a tycoon. In the exhibitions I present parts of the collection to the public- this is very important for me. To hold a permanent space is for mega-rich collectors, who can afford it."

And Igal Ahuvi can? The rumor has it that there is a new trend of opening private museums.

"I do not want to talk about anyone. I'm no longer of age to compare who has the bigger one. I maintain the nature and character of my collection. I matured. I'm no longer interested in looking powerful and extravagant. There were artists that were very salient and then declined because of it."

An exhibition also requires a great investment.

"We have invested about 250 thousand Shekels in the entire exhibition in the Tel Aviv Museum. The cost of the exhibition in the "Givon Art Forum" last year resulted in about 300 thousand Shekels. The exhibition with Daimler is financed fully by the Daimler collection. We have invited all the Israeli artists that are presented in the exhibition to come to the exhibition. Some were present during the opening others will arrive later on."

"A sort of memory"

The activity of collection is paid for from the O.R.S budget. Does the art burden this balance?

"I have a budget but it's flexible and there are discrepancies. Once I was able to afford an expensive work in Basel- a blue heart by Jeff Koons, and during that year it was not appropriate to spend such an amount of money."

Are there periods that your accountants tell you to "slow down"?

"Of course. I focus more on Israeli Art because in the International Art market the prices have gone up considerably. I believe that there are great works in Israeli art and the market is very lively."

Where do you find the adrenaline? The excitement?

"The excitement is in being captivated by Tzibi Geva and to see a new work or to make an appointment with Ilit Azoulay at her studio for half an hour and ending up staying for three

hours. To see Mahmoud Bakshi- with those cigarettes- a work from organic materials that is exhaustible.

Do you feel that works that lose their shape also lose from their value?

"I believe that it is the expression of the artist, his alienation for the unbearable amount of money spilled on the art of today. On the one hand, artists are only just surviving the month, struggling for their existence; on the other hand works of art that each one of them created can also provide for the entire market. The excessive prices of today's art market lead to reduction and deflation in the way art is being measured and the acquisition of art by people who want to show off their money and not the value of the artwork."

If you had to, as the cliché goes, choose one work from the collection, what would it be?

"It's a hard question. Each item is a form of memory, it's like browsing through an album of personal photos; in each work there is a sort of memory and experience - the meeting with the artist, a place and a single moment in life."

"'The swimmer' by Dganit Berst, for example, is the first work I purchased in my life and it perpetuates my meeting with Dganit after her lecture- she has established my connection with art."

Do you feel that today you understand the younger artists less?

"Actually not. I always look for the next rising star and I get excited when I see someone who has found a new artistic language. Perhaps the next age will be one of Image that will be shared online and anyone that downloads it will pay the artist one dollar. He can become a billionaire."

"It's a blessed pluralism on the one hand but chaotic on the other. Whatever it is that will be left at the end is what will reflect the current zeitgeist. Whatever doesn't reflect the zeitgeist is simply mannerism."

The author of this article was hosted in Berlin by the Doron Sebbag Art collection.