

ART MARKET *France*

Don't call them 'Outsiders': Paris dealer sticks to Art Brut

Christian Berst won't do a dedicated fair, but hopes to attract US buyers with a New York branch of his French gallery

DEALER PROFILE

Paris, New York. The Parisian dealer Christian Berst, who specialises in Art Brut, is one of the latest newcomers to New York, having opened on Rivington Street, in the Lower East Side, at the end of 2014. As we went to press, however, he was not due to show in the city's dedicated Outsider Art Fair (29 January-1 February), now in its 24th year, alongside specialist dealers such as Ricco Maresca and Andrew Edlin (who has owned the fair since 2012).

The reason: Berst never says that he deals in "Outsider Art" – a term invented by the academic and curator Roger Cardinal and used as the title of his 1972 book as an English equivalent of "Art Brut".

Berst finds the term too broad, and believes it sails closer to Folk Art. "Over time, the label of Outsider Art has come to cover such a wide field that it no longer satisfies anyone," he says. "Now, almost everything today that is not strictly contemporary art is presented under this label. It could include a self-taught artist, or even a professional who produces work that vaguely echoes the stereotyped image of 'Art Brut,'" he says.

He is determined instead to stay true to Jean Dubuffet's 1945 definition of Art Brut as "productions of all kinds – drawings, paintings, embroideries, modelled or sculpted figures... with a spontaneous and strongly inventive character, with as little debt as possible to traditional art or cultural clichés, and made by persons unknown to and estranged from a professional artistic milieu."

Seeking contemporary buyers

In New York, where his gallery is backed by his business partner Daniel Klein, Berst wants to develop a dialogue between Art Brut and contemporary art (he says that 90% of this clients now come from the field of contemporary art) and is considering including pieces by contemporary artists whose work resonates with his programme. His opening exhibitions were a group show, "Do the Write Thing", and a solo exhibition of works by Joy Drury Cox (both closed in December). Austin Eddy's show "It's Not that Simple" is up until 11 February and Cathryn Boch and Robert Beatty are due to show in the autumn.



The idea is ultimately to bring in US collectors, whom he says are still under represented in his clientele (Berst also participated in December's Nada art fair in Miami Beach).

Mesopotamia or art?

Berst originally came to Paris from Strasbourg to work in publishing and, with his wife, developed the website Chapitre.com, an online bookseller that predated Amazon. He had two private passions: ancient Mesopotamia and Art Brut. The latter won through.

He first set up shop in 2005 on the rue de Charenton in Paris's 12th arrondissement before moving to the Marais, the stronghold of the city's contemporary galleries. "I was struck by the art world's ignorance of these artists. So I began a kind of mission to make it [Art Brut] recognisable by all as the latest and, I think,



The group show "Do the Write Thing" at Christian Berst's New York gallery (above); Berst in Paris (left)

the most captivating terra incognita in art," he says.

Nearly ten years later, tastes have evolved: "We have gone from indifference or disdain to institutional and public recognition. Art Brut is now present at the Venice Biennale, at the Centre Pompidou or at the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, which this year is dedicating a whole room to Henry Darger [the reclusive Chicago hospital custodian whose works brought him posthumous fame]. We're witnessing a revolution." This was borne out by the critical success of the exhibition of Bruno Decharme's collection at the Maison Rouge in Paris, which closed on 18 January. In December, an untitled work on paper by Darger, around 1940-60, sold at Christie's in Paris for €601,500, a record for the artist.

Roxana Azimi

Soto and Perrotin's Atlantic crossings

The Paris mega-dealer Emmanuel Perrotin began to represent the estate of the Venezuelan kinetic artist Jesús Rafael Soto (who died in 2005) last year. A significant clincher in winning the estate was the promise of two concurrent exhibitions at the dealer's Paris and New York galleries (right, *Pénétrable BBL bleu*, 1999, in Paris), which are now under way (jointly titled "Chronochrome", until 28 February in Paris, until 21 February in New York). Matthieu Poirier, who has organised the exhibitions, describes them as "autonomous and complementary" and – thankfully, given they are a good 5,500km apart – says that they "can be viewed without seeing the other". M.G.



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