

INTERNATIONAL
Herald Tribune



The terrible toll of art anxiety

By Joyce Wadler

Thursday, February 28, 2008

Teddy Greenspan is a longtime art collector who does not suffer doubt. He is a bond salesman at Libertas Partners, in Greenwich, Connecticut, and he and his wife, Emily, recently created an art consulting company in Bedford, New York, called tag-arts. The pieces he sells average about \$20,000, with a few selling for as much as \$90,000; his clients, many of whom work in the financial fields, can well afford them. So you can imagine his frustration when dealing recently with a friend and potential client he calls "Mr. No-Name Hedge Fund Manager."

"He's in his 30s, probably worth 20-some million and feels poor because his personal net worth has gone down from 26 million since last summer," Greenspan said. "He buys a Park Avenue apartment for \$7 million, spends another \$7 million decorating it, and now he quibbles over \$15,000 or \$18,000 for a painting."

As an art consultant, Greenspan has encountered this kind of conflict before.

"If you are in the process of decorating a home, you know what the sofa costs; you have a good idea of what wallpaper costs," he said, but art is different. "People don't like spending big numbers on things they don't understand. They understand the boat, the fur, the car, but for lack of homework or lack of taste, they just don't understand art."

Art paralysis: It is a widespread and often crippling malady, striking everyone from the new college grad in his or her first apartment to the super-rich banker, lasting anywhere

from a few months to a lifetime. How many are affected is not known, perhaps because the victims are often too embarrassed to come forth. Who wants to admit that "I've had these posters since college, I know that as one of the American Top 10 Orthodontists I should get some real art, but I don't know what that means"? Or that "It's not that I'm trying to make a minimalist statement with these empty white walls, I just don't know what to buy"? Or "I walk into those snooty galleries in Chelsea and feel like I just don't belong"?

The fact that there are so many more of these galleries now than there used to be, and that their prices are so much higher — at least for the moment — exacerbates the problem. "Four or five years ago, Chelsea seemed like maybe 30 galleries," said Bernard Lumpkin, a producer at MTV News, who began collecting around that time. "Now it's more like 300. Why would you want to jump in now, when it feels like you're going to drown?"

Joseph Higgins, a 43-year-old portfolio manager in New York with a \$900,000 mini-loft in west SoHo and a house in the suburbs, is one of the rare sufferers who will speak openly about his art paralysis. He blames it on galleries, and overcame it, he said, by breaking free of their grasp.

"You're going into an intimidating space and having a curator or a gallery owner ask you 'Do you like this style or this art' when you have no idea what the price tag is," he said. "It's hard to say, I'm browsing, after someone spends time with you in a gallery and tells you 'I'll put it under a light for you' and sets you up in a little room and brings you a cup of coffee."

Higgins started out by using paintingsdirect.com, a Web site that sells the work of hundreds of artists from around the world in categories ranging from landscape to "fantasy." He has bought 14 paintings there and has little patience with those who would sneer at such a site. New York may be a world capital of modern and contemporary art, he said, but he finds the same "edginess" online that he does in the galleries of Chelsea, at much lower prices.

Mitchell Gold, the co-founder of Mitchell Gold & Bob Williams furniture, shares Higgins's aversion. "I can't stand going into galleries," he said. "They don't put prices on, you get all worked up, you don't know the price is \$20,000 and you think, Gee, I don't want to spend that." (His own stores sell photographs by Tipper Gore, for \$750 to \$2,950, and the prices, he pointed out, are right beside the work.)

James Danziger, who runs the Danziger Projects gallery in Chelsea, which specializes in photography, recently took a walk in the neighborhood and saw something he liked. When he asked to see a price list he was told there wasn't one, which happens to be a violation of the city's Truth in Pricing Law.

That, Danziger said, is a tactic you will find in most of the upper-end Chelsea galleries. "They don't put out price lists," he said. "I said, Can I ask the price of this work? They said it was £2,500. I said, Oh, we're dealing in pounds now? It was a German artist

based in London, but I think if you were a nervous Nellie and asked for a price, and they said no, and finally they gave you a price in pounds, you'd have every reason not to buy."

Art paralysis takes many forms. In addition to the would-be buyers who are intimidated by galleries, there are those worried about making an unfashionable choice; those obsessed with investment value; and those who return to a gallery for months, even years, never buying a thing. (Some of these suffer from a form of art paralysis that Stephen Nordlinger, the president of the Foundry Gallery in Washington, calls red dot syndrome — a desperate longing only for those pieces bearing the red dots that show they've been sold.) And then there are the people whose reasons make no sense at all, at least to those doing the selling.

"I had a whole series of these great chocolates, 10-by-10 inches on boards, \$900 a piece," said Armand Bolling, the director of Karen Lynne Galleries, of Boca Raton, Florida, and Beverly Hills, California, which specialize in large-scale figurative oil paintings. "I held it up on the wall and this lady says, 'It makes me depressed.' I'm like, Is this lady out of her mind? It's a piece of chocolate."

Bolling warmed to his theme. "You go in a house, you see 16 empty walls and two pieces, and one they probably got at an auction for Crohn's or colitis for \$500, and the other was given to them. These people aren't buying art."

Amy Marx, a Maryland painter whose work features images of violent storms and tornadoes, and who currently has a show at OK Harris in SoHo, where her large pieces are listed at between \$8,500 and \$12,500, remembers protracted discussions with a family in Maryland a few years ago. "I stretched all these paintings specifically for them," Marx said. "He" — the man of the house — "said they love them, they want to buy them. Then he called up the next day and said, 'Well, since 9/11, you know.'" We're not talking Manhattan, we're not talking the Pentagon, we're talking Prince George's County in Maryland; nothing happened."

One major reason for art paralysis, many experts say, is the feeling that when buying art you are opening yourself to ridicule. "Art has always been a barometer of class," said Jonathan Santlofer, a Chelsea painter and novelist. "If you buy the wrong thing and people come to your house, you're exposed."

Are New Yorkers really that critical?

Santlofer tells a story that sounds like the beginning of an art joke: an artist (himself), an art writer and a dealer visit the home of a collector. After they leave — the period of time that is the most fraught with danger for New York hosts — the guests tell each other what they really think. "The art writer said, 'Now there's an obvious collection,' " he said. "I said, I could forgive that if the examples he bought were better. The art dealer said he liked 1 out of 40 — and he would totally forgive that if he had sold them the art."

Even people who have been serious collectors in the past may suffer bouts of paralysis, particularly if they're looking at a large investment. Melissa Fink and her husband, Steven Fink, live in Bedford, New York, in "a fabulous, contemporary, 6,000-square-foot house," as Fink described it. "We just spent a fortune doing additions on this fabulous house, it's huge and beautiful and kind of like we have all these empty spaces."

They've worked with art consultants in the past, spending about \$200,000, and are prepared to spend another \$100,000, according to Fink.

"We had our art consultant come two different times," Fink said. "When it comes to artwork, I don't know that I know the value. Are you buying it for enjoyment, or are you buying it for investment? If you buy some Yves Saint Laurent or Halston, you know that you are getting value."

Did she have a bad experience? Yes, she did.

"I was getting a manicure at Canyon Ranch, it was the end of seven days of manicures and hiking and there was this piece of art behind me and I said, It's so lovely, I'll take it."

She bought it impulsively without telling her husband and had it shipped. The moment it arrived, they agreed it was awful. It now lives in a storage room in the fabulous contemporary home. Cost of the painting: \$12,000. Lesson, as explained by the art consultant: "Whatever you do in your life, if you want to buy art on vacation, please call us and let us do some research."

Jonathan Arnold, a 45-year-old Chicago economist, also turned to a consultant for help. He dabbled with collecting in his early 20's, he said, and last year thought about starting again, but feared making a financial mistake. "If you don't know what you're doing," he said, "it's an invitation to be taken down."

Arnold asked friends whose collections he admired how they acquired their work, and came up with the name of an art consultant, Marcia Levine, of Levine Fine Art in Manhattan, who once sold a Modigliani to the Vatican Museums and creates collections for people around the world.

Her commission, should you be new to this world, comes from the gallery, unless she is on retainer from a client. If you're not prepared to make a commitment to creating a collection — which, for a young person, can start with a \$5,000 drawing — don't bother her. Levine arranged for Arnold to go to the Marlborough gallery in New York before an opening to see the work of an American artist named Michael Anderson. Arnold was especially taken with "Strange Party," a collage created from torn bits of street posters. He bought it for \$20,000. He also saw the work of another artist, Steven Charles, and liked it so much that he will be buying a piece that has not yet been finished, for a price he does not know.

"Having just bought a piece that wasn't even hung, I was seduced into buying a piece that wasn't even made," Arnold said, laughing. His art anxieties, you might say, are over.