

Claas Reiss speaks with Conceptual Fine Arts (CFA) ahead of its group exhibition 'Seeds, Voids, and Tailored Cloth' as part of the gallery's residency at CFA in Milan, Italy**'New voices in painting: an interview with gallerist Claas Reiss'**

Leaving the world of finance, Claas Reiss has opened a gallery in London focusing on what he dubs "new voices" in international painting. For Claas Reiss, moving from the world of finance to that of contemporary art was a matter of priorities. His love for art, cultivated since childhood, was fundamental to take the plunge; passion is what ultimately could prompt a shift. His gallery opened in London in 2020, a short time before the pandemic imposed the closure of spaces for art. Irony of fate? Only time will tell. Meanwhile, Reiss has become a curious and motivated gallery owner focusing on young painters, with whom he believes a long-term relationship is necessary. He will soon announce the artists he wants to represent.

How did you come to the decision to become a gallerist specialised in emerging artists?

It has been the result of a long journey. I was exposed to art early on, from visiting watercolour evening courses at art colleges in Germany as a teenager, to my mother being an artist. My uncle in Switzerland still practices as an artist in his early 80s. When I moved to London some 22 years ago I started collecting works of emerging artists with a small budget and also started taking evening oil painting lessons at two art colleges. Over time, art absorbed and took over my life. It felt like a natural choice for me to not only paint, visit artists, collect paintings and go to galleries and museums, but also to open a gallery as a platform for artists to show their work and to build a community around the gallery programme. From 2018, I started working on developing a programme focused on "new voices" in international contemporary painting in a primary market capacity.

During the last edition of Art Brussels, you mentioned another detail about the decision making process that helped your choice.

There have been many small elements and catalysts that helped drive my decision making process but you are probably referring to my father passing away in early 2018 after a long and fulfilling professional life. I remember looking at him on his deathbed, thinking "life is too short for compromises and I should follow my passion." It was clear after this moment that I would move ahead and do what I felt is right for me.

Given that London hasn't proved to be the most fertile ground for emerging artists in recent times, why did you decide to open here?

Perhaps I should start saying that I absolutely believe in traditional bricks-and-mortar. Online can at best support the efforts of a gallery in my view. Fairs like Liste Basel or Paris Internationale and gallery hosting initiatives can give an international exposure. Participating at Art Brussels' Discovery section in April 2022 after less than a year of programming was a great experience and has led to a wider audience. Keeping costs low is another important consideration to make a programme focused on "new voices" sustainable in my view.

London remains an important global hub for art production and distribution. It has globally recognised art schools and artistic as well as curatorial talent. There are universities like Slade, Goldsmiths or RCA just to name a few, in addition to a number of global institutions and a growing supporter base. On the other hand, it is a very competitive market place with hundreds of galleries and project spaces; numbers are growing weekly, in particular in 2022 in a post Covid environment. It is very inspiring to be a part of such a dynamic and fast changing community.

On a more pragmatic basis, my family is happy in London. My wife's job helps to pay our bills and my two kids were born and raised here. Funnily enough, years ago I had also been given advice by one of London's veteran gallerists to open a gallery in Brussels or Cologne instead of in London post Brexit but I didn't listen. Still, these two locations could be of interest to me for a second space, either on my own or via sharing initiatives with like minded gallerists, like Maison De Rendez Vous or Echo have done in Brussels and Cologne respectively.

Where is the gallery located?

The gallery is based in central London in the Regent's Park Estate, an area of brutalist style, postwar high-rise council housing just north of Fitzrovia across Euston Road, a 5-minute walk from Frieze London and the sculpture park in Regent's Park, and 5 tube lines all in 5-10 minutes walking distance. Fitzrovia increasingly has developed into the gallery hub for smaller London galleries while being nearby the established galleries, institutions and museums. It was important to me to be central and accessible while keeping costs low so that I can focus on my programme and show what it is important to me.

The gallery has 1,250 square feet, occupies the ground floor and lower level of a former newsagent retail unit and feels open and bright, with a full wall of glass facing the street. Many visitors have commented in the past that the gallery and the neighbourhood have a "European" feel, sometimes it reminds me of a mini version of Capitain Petzel in East Berlin.

Where are you originally from?

I'm from Germany, from which I moved to London some 22 years ago. Part of my family is from Hamburg, but I grew up in the South West of Germany, close to the French border.

Do you have a mid term plan?

I don't have a defined mid term plan but have certain aspirations while staying focused on "new voices" in international contemporary painting.

I will announce my first artist representations in the very near future. My key aspiration is to build a community of artists around my programme and offer the artists I work with a growing set of opportunities. Taking part in fairs is an example, or the upcoming gallery residency at CFA in Milan. I also have an eye on and open ear for hosting and sharing initiatives and will host Philippa zu Knyphausen's *piloto pardo* at the gallery in London during the period while I am in Milan. Opening a second space in Brussels is a possibility to give my artists exposure to the Belgian collecting community. At the same time I am conscious of the time and resources necessary to make growth sustainable for a one-man show like I am at the moment.



Claas Reiss, London (photo credit: Damian Griffiths)

Could you elaborate on your decision to focus on painting?

Simply put, it is where my passion lies: I paint myself, I have collected paintings for over 20 years, have seen many painting shows and my eye is settled to be confident in my choices, focusing on quality without chasing trends. My reaction to paintings can be physical and, in the extreme, feels like gasping for air or pressure in my chest. Mostly I have this reaction for works where the process of painting and its materiality is visible. I also increasingly enjoy conceptual work which employs painting or draftsmanship as a tool.

Are you also interested in the secondary market?

No, I am not, though I am conscious of the fact that the role of a gallerist may also include supporting the artists when they become part of the secondary market and its dynamics. At this stage I don't really follow the secondary market and it is not a consideration when developing my programme.

How is your gallery set up?

As mentioned, the space has two levels. The ground floor is focused on the "Claas Reiss" gallery programme with 6-8 shows per year, mainly solo presentations of artists I wish to work with longer term. The lower ground floor level is where I make shows under "Projektraum London", independent from the

gallery programme and showing artists with no to limited exhibition history or those who at this stage have less appetite to work within the framework of a commercial gallery. I also often feel free from the constraints of running a gallery and more experimental. At the same time it enriches my programme and the link to my gallery programme is closer than I initially expected. For example Dan Loxton had a solo show in Projektraum London in 2021, after which I invited him to do a duo presentation at Art Brussels 2022 Discovery section earlier this year. Now he is included in the group show at CFA. In 2023 he will have a solo show at Claas Reiss. Another example of the flexibility Projektraum London offers beyond the gallery programme is that I currently host Goldsmiths' MFA Curating class whereby the space is made available to the winning proposal of student curators.



'Work', Magnus Frederik Clausen, installation view at Claas Reiss, London (photo credit: Damian Griffiths).

On a geographic level, is there any region that you would like to explore more in depth?

The focus of my programme is on “new voices” in international contemporary painting and not focused on the UK only. There are already many great galleries in London supporting local artists. Up to now I have shown 16 artists from 12 different countries. For London-based artists I have so far focused on artists with little exhibition history. My second show was with James Collins, who graduated from Wimbledon and Royal College of Art a few years ago but hadn’t been shown in the UK since then; I offered him his first ever solo show. Dan Linden graduated from Slade two months before his solo show at the gallery; in early 2023 I will show two recent graduates from RCA and RA Schools respectively. At the same time I have organised an exhibition with Ansel Krut earlier this year with an interesting thematic approach, showing his works in conjunction with his own collection of works swapped with artist friends or family members – Ansel worked with Modern Art and Marlborough New York for many years and is a hero in young London painter circles.

What is your approach when it comes to choosing an artist to work with?

I need to have an emotional relationship to an artist’s work to start with, the “gasping for air” feeling described earlier.

The artist community around the gallery aspect is important to me, we share aesthetic sensibilities and artists I work with suggest other artists they know, love, and introduce to the gallery programme. For example Sara Rossi introduced me to Michel Gomm, or Dan Loxton introduced me to Magnus Frederik Clausen, whose solo presentation will be on view during Frieze London 2022 later in October. In early 2023 I will show a NYC based painter who was a fellow student at the Hunter MFA course with Jule Korneffel and Dan Linden some time ago.

What kind of relationship do you prefer to have with the artists?

It varies from artist to artist. With some I have daily or almost daily exchanges, with others less, but we are still connected in particular in the social media age.

As an emerging gallerist, do you see your age a weakness or a strength?

It is probably a bit of both. As a gallerist in his mid 50s and focusing on “new voices”, I may not have the same access to all circles in the art community. Many great gallerists started showing their peer artists friends when they opened. At the same time I have a settled eye and am confident in my choices to not chase trends. I also often collect works of the artists I work with, providing additional support beyond my own shows, offering advice on their career. I also have an extensive network of gallery contacts I have developed over the years. Ultimately I share the passion for and love of painting with my artists. The feedback from the artists I visit is often that I am truly interested in the work, and art in general, which surprisingly doesn’t seem to be the norm.

How would you position yourself as a gallerist and who are your role models?

There is one aspect of being a gallerist that I didn’t expect in the beginning – as a hobby painter you look at and admire craftsmanship of works of fellow painters. As a collector, the number one question for me is whether I would like to look at the work every day. As a gallerist, however, there is a different set of

challenges and the universe of artists under consideration for a gallery programme is different and much smaller.

In response to your question about my role models, generally I don't wish to model my gallery on anybody else's and stay authentic to my mission. I see my role as a gallerist, not just an art dealer, and am interested in long term relationships.

However, the type of gallerist that resonates most with me is Betty Parsons, a collector, painter and gallerist, all at the same time. I like Michael Werner for its conservative focus on quality beyond current trends and, of the more contemporary peers, Michael Callies of dépendance in Brussels who built an impressive programme of artists like Michael Krebber, Michaela Eichwald, Richard Aldrich or Henrik Olesen while being successfully exposed to the more commercial aspects of the art market.

Where would you say contemporary art is today?

At this point in time I am very focused on the gallery and developing its programme, and less the things I can't change anyway. But perhaps I can share an anecdote. I opened the gallery on 4 November 2020 with a solo presentation of New York based Jule Korneffel – it was the night before the nationwide lockdown began, hence a perfect timing for me [laughs]. Galleries in London were allowed to open again in early December for a period of 2 1/2 weeks. The first two days I had no visitors. I locked the door at 6pm and went to Mayfair for the Friday late night gallery event to visit exhibitions at the big galleries. Most of them had no visitors either, for example I have been on my own at a mega gallery like Zwirner! I remember thinking that how is it possible that society doesn't flock to galleries to see art in person after having been locked away at home for four weeks – yet only a few meters away shopping districts like Regent's Street or Oxford Street were packed.

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