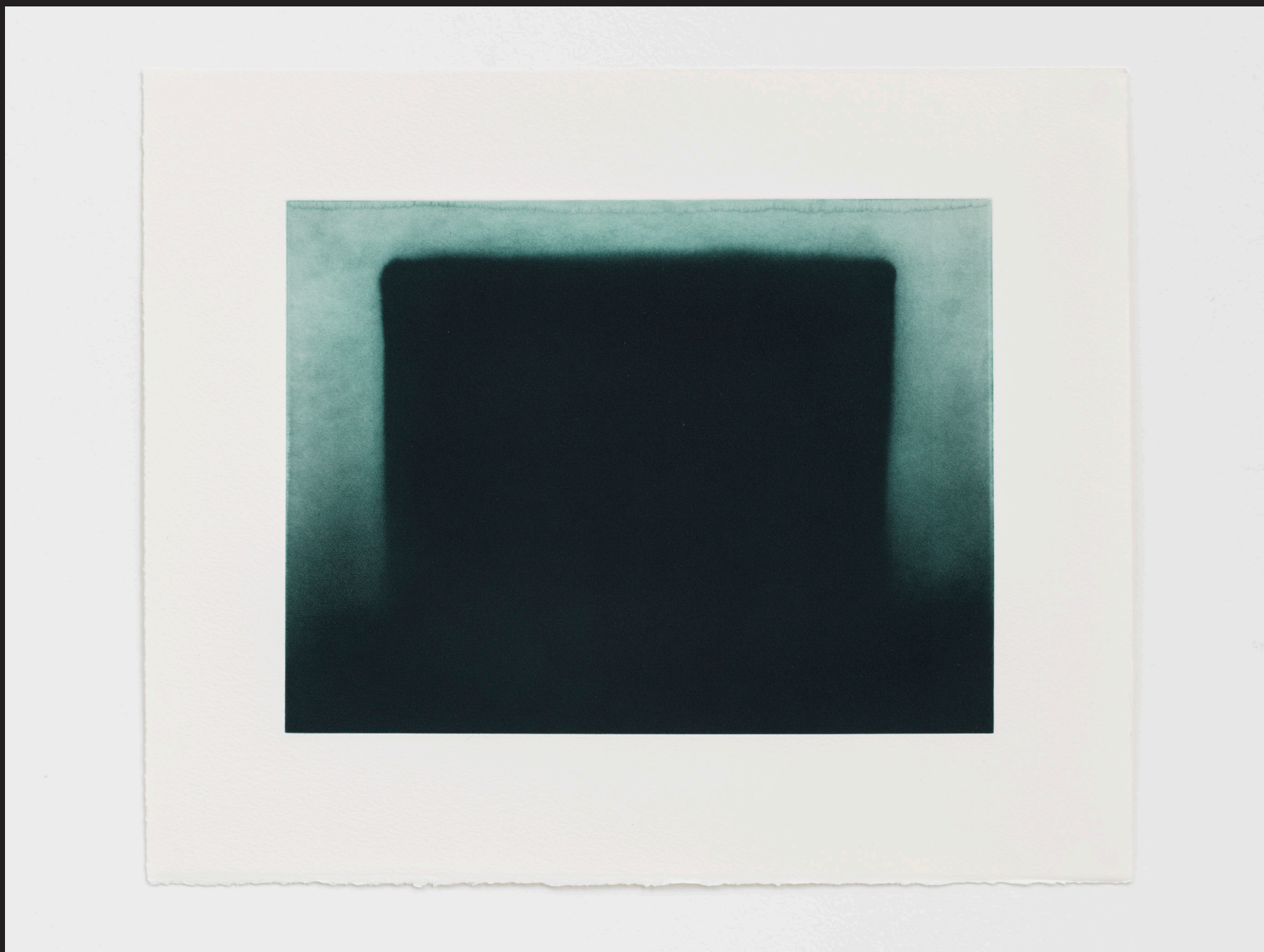


VALUE ADDING



With its innovative new model, Artists Support is ingeniously bringing together artists, collectors and charitable causes in a way that benefits all parties

STORY **MARIA SHOLLENBARGER**



Here are a few things the New York-based art historian and advisor Clara Zevi discovered during the early days of 2020: Anish Kapoor has long had an interest in helping victims of trafficking and torture to start new lives. Michael Craig-Martin feels equally strongly about providing homeless youth with viable paths to safe housing, employment and financial stability. Hiroshi Sugimoto admires those who advocate for underprivileged, at-risk adolescents, directing them towards vocational training and away from a future of incarceration.

As Zevi – a charismatic 28-year-old with the poise and intellectual confidence of someone twice her age – has learned, there are many more such examples of philanthropic inclinations in the world of contemporary artists, both celebrated names like the ones above and emerging talents. But it took a pandemic, she says, and the subtle but pervasive shift in the art-world atmosphere that Covid brought about, to appreciate the potential they hold.

In early 2020, as the market and its dizzying schedule of events were upended, everyone feared not just for their own futures, but for their greater communities; in New York in particular, Zevi recalls, the potent atmosphere of solidarity within the art world also extended well outside it. She and her good friend and sometime collaborator, the multidisciplinary artist Oscar Tiné – also 28 – had already been ruminating on the dynamic between artists, charities and collectors. Artists are constantly asked to donate work to various philanthropic concerns they have no part in choosing, usually under the aegis of their gallery or dealer. But nowhere, Zevi and Tiné realised, was there a philanthropy model that put collector, artist and cause into collaboration transparently and interactively – or that empowered the artist in that equation.

Thus Artists Support was born. Its mission is to streamline and simplify the transactional elements of the artist-collector-charity trifecta, in ways that benefit all three parties. The artist first designates a charity, and donates a work; Zevi and Tiné then find a buyer. No money

ever changes hands via Artists Support; instead, when a buyer commits, Zevi and Tiné connect them personally to a director at the designated charity, who walks them through making a donation; the work is released to the buyer only when that donation has been transferred. Zevi and Tiné work on a pro-bono basis (making Artists Support, as Zevi notes dryly, the anti Covid side hustle). The collector gets the benefit of full investment parity: “You make a \$10,000 dollar donation to a charity and you get a work valued at \$10,000,” says Zevi. And the optics tend to cast everyone involved in a flattering altruistic light, so the gallerists representing the artists have been, Zevi and Tiné say, surprisingly supportive.

The first sale took place in New York in December 2020; a second followed in London in June of last year. They are structured like selling exhibitions, as opposed to auctions: “Charity auctions tend to devalue an artists’ work, which is not what we wanted to do here,” says Tiné. “We have an invite list for viewings, we have people who call ahead [for a private view], you have people who walk in from the street,” adds Zevi. “Then everything is online, with all the nitty-gritty” – artist biography and verification, a description of the charity and how it all operates.

The New York sale comprised established names, says Tiné, “because we wanted to kind of start with a bang”. Zevi notes it was also still quite early in the pandemic, “and we were not going to ask artists as young as we are to start donating works, when even super-established names with 20 people working in their studio were having to let go of 10 of them. Whereas for London, we wanted, and were able, to open it up to more emerging artists” – for whom the association with a handful of blue-chip names brought the benefit of increased visibility.

Some of the artists who have contributed to Artists Support are ones with whom its founders had existing relationships: the American fine-art photographer Stephen Shore, who donated a colour print to the New York show, was Tiné’s adviser at Bard College; Craig-Martin was included in an exhibition at the gallery of London- and Venice-based Alma Zevi, founded by Zevi’s sister (it’s now Paterson Zevi, an art agency and advisors); and Zevi herself interned for Kapoor in 2009. Others,

Clara Zevi, above
left and Oscar Tiné,
right
Opposite: Anish
Kapoor, *Monad*,
2010-20



Clockwise from left: **Sophie Wahlquist, Perch or Fly, 2021**; **Charlotte Edey, Almost, installation**; the artist **Hiroshi Sugimoto**; **Stephen Shore, Texas Hots**; **Charlap Hyman Herrero Shell Lamps**; **Hiroshi Sugimoto, Teatro Dei Rozzi, Siena 2014**





Zevi says, “were just cold calls”: when she emailed the studio of Lorna Simpson, not necessarily expecting a reply, the director quickly emailed back, saying Zevi and Tiné’s model “spoke to” Simpson – who ended up creating a unique \$35,000 collage for the New York show in support of Until Freedom, a grassroots social justice organisation (Artists Support placed it with a Parisian collector). “Oscar and I would almost drop our computers every time” such a positive response reached them, Zevi says. “It was amazing for us personally, but also it showed there was a thirst for this model. We want to put artists in the driver’s seat – we want them to have more agency and involvement in this [philanthropy] conversation. It’s them giving away their art, after all. It’s incredibly generous of them.”

Some had charities to which they had already donated, or with which they were already affiliated; Kapoor (who nominated The Helen Bamber Foundation) and English art personality-Turner prizewinner Grayson Perry (who donated his proceeds to Koestler Arts, which brings the arts into the prison system) were two examples. But there are as many lesser-known names who came to the table with set ideas. The buzzy British illustrator Charlotte Edey designated the proceeds of her sale to St Mungo’s, which provides shelter to the homeless in the UK. Like Simpson, Edey says she too immediately found Zevi’s and Tiné’s model compelling: “The specificity and autonomy it offers feel unique. There’s no commission, no fees, and it gave me the opportunity to establish an ongoing relationship [with] a cause that’s deeply important to me.”

Artists Support collaborates with, and, when necessary, advocates on behalf of the charities as well. “We work to understand each organisation, where the funds are going, how and where to generate excitement about it” among collectors, says Zevi. If an artist is enthusiastic about participation but has only broad thematic, rather than specific, ideas about where to direct their donation, Zevi and Tiné get busy with research and due diligence: “An artist might cite women’s health, or children’s education, as their interest, and Oscar and I do a deep-dive in the field.”

The buyer base, like the artists one, started with a small, varied cohort from their shared and individual networks. “For New York, it was mostly word-of-mouth, to our immediate circle,” says Zevi. By the time the London sale went online, Zevi and Tiné found themselves being contacted by major collectors from Canada, the US and Europe who’d heard the buzz. “We’re proud to support them,” says Wendy Chang, director of the Vancouver-based Rennie Collection, which focuses on themes surrounding identity and appropriation, and includes works by John Baldessari, Martin Creed, Kerry James Marshall and Mona Hatoum. “It’s a great opportunity for collectors at all levels to acquire good work by great artists and participate in supporting the important organisations Artists Support’s endeavours benefit.”

“Obviously great art is great art, and people are always going to buy it,” says Tiné. But this kind of affirmation “legitimised for us that the model makes sense to people”.

Last month, Artists Support had its third show in Los Angeles to time with Frieze Week, which launched there in 2019. Though the events side of things isn’t up and fully running in LA, the art world is slowly returning to normal – “galleries are having shows, so there’s art to see, if not the normal openings movement around it,” Tiné says. Artists are more in demand now, he notes, meaning Artists Support has worked to longer lead times to make this show happen. But happen it did, and with an impressive line-up: at time of press, those who had committed works ranged from local contemporary kingpins such as Brian Calvin, Jim Shaw and Eve Fowler to the sought-after design art-architecture team of Charlap Hyman and Herrero (Zevi curated a show of their work at the 2019 Venice Biennale). “It’s fantastic that there is an organisation facilitating the sale of our work to specifically benefit a cause of our choice as we, and I imagine many other people who make things, don’t generally have the margins in other commission-based partnerships to be donating proceeds like this,” says co-founder Adam Charlap Hyman.

And what’s next? “Sydney...? Sydney!” Zevi says with a laugh – along, Tiné adds, with Paris, Hong Kong, Seoul, and Mexico City. “But we’d love to get to know the art scene in Australia better.” And specifically, she emphasises, the area where art and charity and collecting meet: “That’s the bit of the Venn diagram we’re always interested in.” ^(w)

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