

## Start something special: contemporary art collection - The Friday

Fancy being the next Charles Saatchi? You don't have to have millions or a home as big as the Tate to start a special art collection, says Francesca Gavin.

Francesca Gavin

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At the opening night of a recent exhibition by upcoming UK artist Charming Baker, there was – among the typical art crowd, made up of fashionable types and city investors – a distinctly new, laid-back set of collectors enjoying the art, drinks and live DJ.

It was more like a party than a private view. "I've sold work to lawyers, city guys and creative directors," says the artist, "but now I'm also selling to students and housewives."



A Conversation Piece by Charming Baker (left) and For JP Sartre by Glenn Brown Photo: CHARMING BAKER / TATE

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Baker, who has just secured the backing of an American artist-management company, believes that the art world is changing. "It feels less elitist," he explains. "People are buying what they like, not what they are told to like."

An increasingly savvy British public is adjusting its relationship with the new art world, with more people finding the confidence to buy. And while some seek the pleasure of looking and owning, others see it as a form of investment.

Three years ago, for instance, Baker's paintings were selling for £600 – they now fetch up to £9,000. The popularity of his work is also being boosted by the fact that everyone can now access it via the internet. So, rather than having to step into daunting galleries, potential collectors can log on to view art in their own homes.

Another artist who spotted the democratic, and commercial, potential of the internet was Banksy, a street artist. His canvases, that originally cost £400 online, have gone on to sell for up to £60,000 at auction.

A lot of the initial interest in buying a Banksy, however, was generated by enthusiasm for his prints – which, traditionally, are sold at more democratic prices than original works.

Steve Lazarides, who co-founded the online gallery POW (Pictures On Walls) with Banksy, first specialised in selling limited-edition prints. "You could start off paying as little as £50 a print," says Lazarides, "so they provide the perfect entry-level to start collecting."

Lazarides is viewed as one of the major sellers in this field, and his eponymous galleries in London and Newcastle deal in both prints and original works. He now sells a broad range of art to an increasingly broad range of clients.

For those who like the idea of buying well-known names, contemporary galleries - such as the White Cube, The Serpentine, the ICA and 176 Gallery in London; Ikon in Birmingham; Baltic in Gateshead; and all of the Tate galleries - produce very impressive limited-edition pieces to accompany shows.

Smaller establishments, such as The Modern Institute in Glasgow (which has spawned a few Turner Prize winners) also offer artist editions.

When Damien Hirst first released editioned prints of his famous spot paintings a few years back, the price tag was a very affordable £500. Those same prints are now changing hands for more than £10,000.

To collectors it is an increasingly acceptable way to own and invest in art.

"We were getting a huge range of people coming in to see shows, and quite a few of them asked if there were affordable pieces available," says Sam Chatterton Dixon at the contemporary London gallery Haunch Of Venison.

Producing limited-edition prints by artists was a way for the gallery to respond. "There is a sense, with those interested in collecting, that if they start with prints then, over time, they might move up to buying more expensive items."

The always experimental and interesting Zoo Art Fair, now simply called Zoo, is devoting an entire section of its October event to accessibly priced artworks. Art fairs such as Zoo and the Glasgow Art Fair are like supermarkets for contemporary art, and present a comfortable environment in which to begin looking.

"They are a really easy way for someone to see an awful lot of work under one roof," says Jonathan Burton, director of the London Art Fair (LAF). "There is a huge range of price points." Indeed, at this year's LAF you could pick up anything from a £200 print to a £3-million painting.

On a smaller scale, London galleries like Crisp (which also has a space in Los Angeles) and Ancient & Modern, and Edinburgh gallery The Fruitmarket, all exhibit upcoming names.

Upcoming names worth grabbing now include the text and multimedia works by Charlie Woolley at David

Risley Gallery; Sam Griffin, who produces intensely worked drawings and who shows with Schirman & de Beaucé in Paris; and Bouke de Vries, whose delicate sculptures are available online from the web-based MurmurART.

In fact, this online space specialises in promoting artists in the difficult stage between graduating and getting a gallery. The result is an ever-changing number of interesting, wellcurated artists selling from £90.

"Buying art requires you to not just look inside the painting," notes MurmurART's Donald Eastwood, "but also inside your soul."

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