

THE ART DEALERS I: MAX HUTCHINSON

Interviewed by JOSEPH SZABO

(Contemporary Art Society of Australia NSW Broadsheet, October 1972)

S) *Do you see yourself as a connoisseur, public educationist or merchant?*

H) All three.

S) *What's most important to you – the public, the artist or art?*

H) Well the most interesting thing in my life style is my connection with and work for artists. There is no question. The public, in certain instances, when one forms a bond with somebody that looks to you for guidance and assistance can be very rewarding as well. Art as far as I am concerned is made by artists, so that it necessarily follows that artists are probably the more important aspect of it.

S) *So you consider all three, but art would be the first?*

H) No. Artists; artists without question. The art follows the artist, and it is in my rapport with artists that I get my enthusiasm and interest and what I'm doing and as you probably know, it is a 24 hours a day job. We don't close up shop here at 5 o'clock and forget about it, one is totally involved, and therefore if one is not getting a lift from one's association with artists it would be a godawful business to be in.

Because I'm not dealing with merchandise as such, I am dealing with what a guy does. I am his entrepreneur, rather than being a storekeeper.

S) *Can you influence your buyer's perception in matters of art?*

H) Yes. It is possible for me to do that. I can certainly influence what he buys.

S) *But I mean as a tastemaker*

H) Well, I can influence what people buy. If they buy good paintings it is my hope that there will be a sufficient amount of intrigue involved with what they have purchased to make them look and look and look and look, harder and harder.

S) *You mean you hope that in the process they will learn about them.*

H) Yeah. I think that if a guy, even if the fellow is recently departed from the Philistine stage and has decided that he must get involved and he has some sense of adventure in looking at paintings, if I can entice him to purchase works of an intriguing quality and the man has committed money, he will certainly look damn hard at the painting and wonder why the hell he bought it. This is half the battle for me.

- S) *Do you think money is a necessary agent to influence people's enthusiasm?*
- H) Sure. The commitment from the consumer is a sort of reciprocal thing to the artist's commitment. If a man goes out and works all bloody day to make money..
- S) *Money becomes an eye opener . . .*
- H) It forces the person that is not automatically involved to concentrate on what he has done. Right? This is quite important. If. For instance, an artists had given him a painting free, I don't think would bring his intellect to bear as much as if he's committed the money.
- S) *He would tend to take it for granted.*
- H) Sure. Don't forget we're dealing with people who work hard for money.
- S) *Well everybody works hard for money, but surely art has a spiritual interest that money can't influence. How will the buyer respond to all this? You maintain they will respond if they sacrifice a certain amount of earthly goods like money ...*
- H) Sure, until they reach a point where they could be artists themselves the money of course must be important to them, therefore it is a commitment, therefore they start to dig into what they have purchased.
- S) *One would think that people would spontaneously be intrigued by art.*
- H) Oh, some are and don't have to purchase it but they are the people that have educated themselves very highly with paintings and sculpture. Some don't have to purchase it ... we have people who come into the gallery who have neither the means to purchase or the space, and they have bought the art that they are able to hang. We have people coming into the gallery like that, that are the best viewers – the people that please us most and they don't even buy paintings.
- If personal perception is already being acutely developed over the years they don't have to buy it, there's no question. But to convert a guy out of the Philistine ranks, that's what I was speaking of . . .
- S) *They're positively influenced by this sacrifice.*
- H) Sure .
- S) *Well, what's your qualifications as a dealer?*
- H) I've been involved in art galleries for 14 years; I've always been involved in visual phenomena since 1945 when I had a business which was involved in the first place with display materials; exhibition stands . . .
- S) *Therefore when you stepped into the field of dealing with art it was an impromptu decision.*

- H)** To put you exactly in the picture, my decision came as a very large furniture manufacturer in Melbourne. I had a showroom in the city of Melbourne; this showroom became redundant because most of my work was involved in contract stuff, hotels, motels, boutiques, restaurants, and these were being done by contract. I developed for Australia ..a very avant garde range of furniture, and was involved in these contract deals, in which I was inserting Australian works of art – contemporary works – **Meadmore** was on my staff as a designer and . . .
- S)** *Was **Meadmore** a sculptor at the time?*
- H)** Yes, he had begun his sculpture career and one day he said to me, "Look, you're using these artists in these projects, you know that these guys can't get a show in any of the existing galleries, so why don't you turn this place into a gallery?" So I said, "Okay, you run it". This was the beginning, 1958.
- S)** *Would you deal with conceptual art if it was sellable artifact?*
- H)** Well, conceptual art is a saleable artifact. **Castelli** for instance in New York has turned his conceptual artists into a bonanza. The use of video tape by conceptual artists in the **Castelli Gallery** probably is returning to both the artists and the gallery more money than any avant garde activity ever. So much for the non-saleability of conceptual art. If you produced a video tape in the **Castelli Gallery** I would say there is a subscription list of around about 7,000 schools who would consume a copy immediately. That's really big money.
- S)** *This, of course, happens in the States, but in Australia there was no precedent in fact, **Inhibodress** had to shut down because . . .*
- H)** Well, **Inhibodress** were non professional dealers. **Inhibodress** consisted of a group of artists. One of them, particularly, involved was in this gallery, as you know, but he never asked me how to handle the situation, and I'm sure that there are ways and means . . .
- S)** *So you put it down to unprofessional management.*
- H)** Dealership, yes. You can't be an artist and a dealer, there's no way you can handle both things at the same time and **Peter Kennedy** told me a week or so ago the reason he felt that they were closing down was not necessarily the money but the fact that he just didn't have the energy to be a dealer and an artist and I don't think it possible, I mean that's where I feel that one is authentic as a dealer . I know certain things and methods and ways and means. If I can appreciate the artist's work and be his entrepreneur I feel there's an authentic case for me.
- S)** *Are you content with the present day taxation system?*
- H)** Yes, well since the Sales Tax has been removed from the import of original works of art, yes, I'm quite happy. There are certain things that go on in the States that are perhaps more advantageous to the artist and to the museums.

There are things like a double deduction, where a guy can donate a painting and retain it for his lifetime, get a taxation reduction in the year of gift and then the amount is again deducted from his Probate. So that they still have a bigger advantage than us.

Of late, we've been getting over to the public to the guy that has a taxation problem, the fact that he's better off to donate a work of art than to give the money directly to the Government and we've been quite successful for the last year or two. This is a new development

- S) *Here is a question that particularly applies to you since you have a gallery in New York and are regarded more as an international dealer than the locals. How do you relate Australian art in general to overseas art?*
- H) I guess I have to agree basically with **Bob Hughes'** statement. I agree with it with certain reservations. Number one, I don't think Hughes was quite fair about the history of Australian art. America has a similar history, in fact, I would even say the colonial painters here are better than any in America. Therefore the prices of this sort of work are entitled to be high. Hughes didn't cover that. I also think that there are other painters here, sculptors, who, if they got off their backsides and fronted up internationally, could be of consequence.
- S) *But how could a local artist, in such an isolated place as Australia, get off his backside and do something?*
- H) Well, I don't think it's very difficult these days. It may have been difficult in the old days when an artist couldn't sell work, but today most young artists in this country are selling works. There is not the sort of total shutoff that there was in the past. Well, my young artists are selling works. I don't see any reason why they can't constantly visit and they can do it, I think - well, Qantas quoted me the other day for a through flight to London for \$460. This is reasonable. The sale of a couple of paintings will get you the trip and in my opinion, whilst I think Australia is a fantastic place for painters and sculptors I really do . . . the environment is tremendous .
- S) *For creative purposes.*
- H) Sure. The only thing that's lacking here is pressure.
- S) *You mean by pressure the pressure of competition?*
- H) The pressure of numbers. In New York and when I say New York I'm not talking only about American artists, I'm talking about the world's artists who come to New York. It is said that there are round about a quarter of a million artists operating in and out of New York. That means the artists of the world. And in my gallery every week I look at 100 sets of slides by artists from throughout the world. I don't see any reason why Australian artists can't be in that number. That is why I'm saying if somebody can get off their backsides from Germany and come to New York to present their work and see if they warrant showing, while they're there naturally they're looking at what's going on.

- S) *But, you know yourself that it takes a hell of a long time in New York to get noticed let alone...*
- H) It's a big battle. Let's say that out of the one million artists, 50, 000 of them might warrant exposure. There are only 10 galleries that these artists of any consequence would want to show. In, 50,000 artists into 10 galleries does not go at all. And that's where the competitive spirit lies. It is just impossible for them all to make it – unless the number of galleries increases, the galleries of consequence, you just can't get equity. There's this incredible culling process. But that's not necessarily apropos of what I said about Australian art. The pressure that I'm talking about is not a pressure of showing, because not many American artists really bug themselves about showing. The majority of artists' studios that I visit, the people are over 35, they haven't had a one man show; they have been represented in museums collections and this sort of stuff, survey shows, **Whitney Annuals**, this sort of thing. They're not bugged because they don't get a show until they're 35. When they feel they are ready they will invite the dealers to their studios.
- S) *What do the newcomers, say an artist from Australia, have to do? He would have to stay there for a certain time*
- H) Yes. New York is parochial enough in this aspect, in that they refuse to accept people that are virtual imports straight off the ship or the aeroplane. They do want to confront the person and it's very easy to meet people; for instance. when I went to New York I had no trouble meeting **Rothko** and **Newman** and found them very helpful to me. There's no sort of standoffishness from senior artists.
- S) *In other words you mean that an artist with some personality could get on just as well as in his own environment?*
- H) I'm sure when you consider that, let's say at the opening of an exhibiton in my gallery on a holiday it opens at 10 am, by 6 pm 5000 artists have seen it. Now this is the means of communication throughout the art world. By the end of that day I know if that show is in or out.
- So there's the real factor. This is what we lack here, and whilst we'll never get that sort of pressure, I want to entice Australian artists there, to join in that, right? And the artists, as I say, there, are very easy to know and will come and look at your work, there's no problem. Even if you can't get in the gallery in the first visit, the artists will look at your work and you can become friends and they'll know that you're a good artist and so it will go on. And if you're any good it will happen.
- S) *Well, in other words, you're saying that not enough Australian artists go there in order to make themselves international.*
- H) That's obvious. Sydney is not the centre of the Art Universe. New York is.

There are quite a few there about 5 or 6 at the moment. You know that **Meadmore** went there 10 years ago, **Michael Johnson** went there 3 years ago.

You know that **Bob Jacks** went there 3 years ago. There are a couple of others that have never even shown here that are working there. It is a long process there's no question.. It's a tough deal, but it's a tough deal for anybody – it's a tough deal for an American. There are not too many artists born in New York City. Most of them come from the midwest or . . .

- S) *Whatever New York is, Europe used to be, if one wants to be internationally on the scene one has to go to New York.*
- H) That's, right! . If that's what an artist wants. In my opinion I don't think any artist has to suit this.
- S) *No, but just assuming that an Australian artist wants . . .*
- H) If he wants to be internationally known he's got to get there because this is where he's got to confront the stars . . .
- S) *This is your firm opinion?*
- H) Sure. I mean there is so much crap in New York that it's unbelievable.
- S) *But the crap can be divided and analysed*
- H) Of course, and when I was talking about pressure before, the pressure comes from the fact that as soon as an artist registers an area for himself there's an academy of 1000 behindhim already, all looking over his shoulders, pressing him on. Now this doesn't happen here. Certainly the journalists here have talked about the individuality of Australian Art. Well it's very easy to be individual here, because there's nobody looking over your shoulder. There are more galleries than artists here, let's face it.

What I would like to make clear is that there is a culling process that takes place by the commercial galleries, assisted by museum curators. For instance if a guy has suddenly decided that he's prepared to show a body of work he will write myself and perhaps 5 or 6 other dealers. He will also write to the curator from the Whitney Museum . . .

- S) *That's, very interesting. Does that happen here in Sydney for instance?*
- H) Oh, I don't think so. What I think happens is that one dealer may take a liking to it. One museum curator might take a liking to it. If that happens for the guy he's in. But he might have to wait until next year. I've told hundreds of artists, "Look I like your work, but I want you to come back next year. And , most of the people that I've shown in my gallery I've looked at for three years before I've decided to commit myself. Occasionally somebody suddenly goes overboard like in the case of **Resnick**, I just went overboard and I decided I just had to chase him like hell and I did. He wasn't a young artist the man is an old abstract expressionist. I saw work I believed was perhaps more to the point of the whole of the New York painting by youngsters, than anything I'd ever seen.

- S) *Would you say that painting is no longer a major cultural force in our society?*
- H) Well, if it isn't, I guess I'm wasting my time. I do believe in both painting and sculpture. I believe in the man made object. I believe that man wants to leave a mark. And I don't see that it can fall outside cultural activity.
- S) *A man can make a mark, but that does not necessarily mean that his mark is important.*
- H) That's right; there are not many marks that are important, I guess. It depends upon the requirement of the human being for maybe today escape, tomorrow a message.
- S) *Now, so you think certain reforms are necessary in general within art itself in order for better communication with the public?*
- H) Yes. I would like to see much more normal involvement between the artists and the person that owns his work.. There,was. an agreement proposed last year which you're probably seen in **Studio International**. The artists' agreement which virtually bound the consumer to the work, the owner and the viewers, to the artist.
- S) *In other words you believe that the physical presence of the artist is as important for communication as his work?*
- H) Goodness no; I don't necessarily believe all that, but I do believe that there ought to be reform, particularly.in Australia, because internationally works aren't slogged off. like they are here. For instance the greatest crime that's perpetuated here is this sort of merchandising of the scraps of an artist, and this is what **Hughes** didn't really bring home . The bug on the Australian art scene is, that \$3 or 4 or 5000 is bled out of the art system, out of people that are interested in art, into the scraps by **Sid Nolan** and **Charlie Blackman** and this sort of stuff by the stores. This precludes those people from advancing art or their art awareness.
- S) *Have you a favourite art form?*
- H) Art form?
- S) *Well, painting, or sculpture, weaving etc, etc.*
- H) Well, I must have a favourite I guess, because one of the accolades that I'm getting now, is that I am the world's greatest authority on contemporary sculpture and all.this stuff . Well I've done a great deal for sculpture. Maybe this is because major works of sculpture require a contract aspect. I'm very experienced in this.
- S) *Meaning that most sculptures are rather being commissioned than just made and sold.*

- H)** Made and sold as they are, yes. I'm very experienced at this contract work due to my previous history.
- S)** *Perhaps, but do you think yourself you're better than most.*
- H)** Well, I think I'm pretty good at it. There's no question, No matter what sculptor I take on I can take him to the top of the tree very quickly. There is no question. That doesn't necessarily mean that sculpture's my favorite thing.
- S)** *But you regard yourself as the connoisseur of sculpture?*
- H)** Not necessarily the connoisseur but certainly the entrepreneur. If I decided to take up a sculptor, I'll take him to the top immediately there's no question.
- S)** *Well, what makes you decide to take up a sculptor, or any other artists for that matter?*
- H)** What makes me decide? Well firstly I naturally look at the work, and if the work interests me at all, I then look at the guy.
- S)** *That's what I want to know. How does a work of art arouse your interest?*
- H)** Well firstly, the work has got to excite me visually to an extent, it may not be in my opinion the ultimate . . .
- S)** *Regarding the history of art?*
- H)** That's right. But it may have the germ there, and then I will ask the artist can I be involved with him and I will watch the situation and the guy and his work for, as I said, up to 3 years before I will commit myself and say, well I'm with you if you want me. I will do my thing for you.
- S)** *In other words you commit yourself to some length of time studying the artist's developments?*
- H)** Yes.
- S)** *And then when he is ready according to your estimation?*
- H)** Then I will proceed with the full entrepreneurship. In between times I've probably been doing a lot of mental work myself. If, as a dealer, particularly in New York, if I'm going to commit myself to a person, that guy is my reputation. Therefore, if I'm going to be of any use to any artist, my reputation has got to be high.
- S)** *You are putting your reputation at stake on the reputation of the artist*
- H)** Well, if my reputation is useless I'm of no use to anybody. Therefore it's a sort of galloping thing, I mean if one is making constant good selections one's reputation becomes high and you're, able to do better things. I'm not sealed off, if

that's what you're looking for. I'm open to all art forms. This is a great occupational hazard and as yet I don't feel I'm sealed off.

S) *Last question: if you couldn't continue as an art dealer what would you do?*

H) If I couldn't I would return to my original profession or perhaps furniture designer.

**Source Contemporary Art Society of Australia NSW Broadsheet, October 1972
p19-25**