

For Many Art Dealers, 'Selling' Is A Dirty Word (But Not For Young Collectors)

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Longtime art collectors Mera and Don Rubell started collecting pieces by artist Keith Haring in 1981. (All three are pictured here in 1989.) The couple rarely considers selling an art work.

Charles Dolfi-Michels/Courtesy of the Rubell Family Collection

Artist [Linn Meyers](#)' studio sits tucked in the backyard of an old house in Washington, D.C. "I've been here since 2002," she says. "It used to be a carriage house." The artist is a little embarrassed by the overgrown ivy that covers the studio ("I know it's bad for the brick") but she hasn't had much time for yardwork: For the past 11 weeks, she's been working on a major, site specific installation at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum.

Meyers says having her work in the Hirshhorn's iconic building is an unbelievable opportunity — and it might not have happened without years of support and encouragement from a certain group of people in the art world. "I've been making a living as an artist for 20 years," she says. "Collectors are big part of that." In fact, Meyers is still in touch some of the first people who collected her work. During a recent talk at the Hirshhorn, she showed a picture of a piece she had made in 1990 — and the collector was in the audience. "That was probably the first piece I ever sold," she says.



Linn Meyers' drawings have swirling lines that curve and spiral together, almost like a fingerprint.

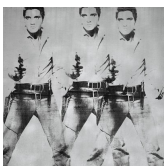
Lee Stalsworth/ Courtesy of Linn Meyers

To an artist like Meyers, collectors can be just as important as curators and critics. But collecting is changing. [A recent U.S. Trust survey](#) of about 700 high net-worth individuals found that people under 50 are more likely than their older peers to see art as a financial investment. Most art collectors, young and old, are still motivated by aesthetics, but Evan Beard, who oversaw the survey, says he observed a "stark philosophical divide" in how younger buyers interact with and view their collections. Beard says the older generation collects "as a lifestyle, as an extension of their autobiography; whereas younger collectors tend to be much more commercially driven."

Art As An Investment

Thirty-five-year-old [Nilani Trent](#) is one such collector. To her, knowing the value of the art you're buying it's just smart investing. She says, "I think any time you are spending the amount of money that collectors are spending nowadays, it's very important to be aware of the market for individual artists."

Trent is also an art advisor based in New York. She says she used to take clients on tours of galleries, hoping they'd fall in love with an artist's work; now she's more likely to meet up with them at events like Art Basel, where buzz matters. And that's changing the conversations she's having with younger clients.



[The 'Mick Jagger' Of Art Auctions Shares Secrets From A High End Market](#)

"I think instead of talking about the aesthetics of a specific work, we really talk about the market," she says. "And I think for someone that doesn't have a high level of connoisseurship, but is probably pretty savvy on finance and wealth, talking about the market is a very obvious go-to."

Where 'Selling' Is A Dirty Word

According to Evan Beard, there's another way millennial and Generation X collectors differ from their older peers: "They're far more interested in selling portions of their collection as they're building their own collection."

To a lot of dealers, "selling" is a dirty word. "Yeah, that's generally frowned upon," says Kurt Mueller, director of the [David Kordansky Gallery](#) in Los Angeles. "We often talk about not 'selling' an artwork but 'placing' an artwork with

a home, with a collector, in terms of it finding a lasting relationship there."

Older collectors often want to live with their art forever, which is good for an artist's long-term career. That's because too much selling has ripple effects: It can flood the market and, for emerging artists, it can set the bar too high. In some cases, Nilani Trent says, artists have just kept doing the same work.

"It's easy to get stuck creating works that sell for quite a bit of money, especially if you sold the first group for only \$2,000 to \$12,000, for example, and then they're selling for half a million dollars at auction," she says. "You might continue to create the same work over and over because you want to make the half million dollars and not the \$12,000."

If collectors start auctioning off their artists, or creating too much hype, it's harder for the artist to grow.



Mera and Don Rubell's Miami-based Rubell Family Collection is open to the public and actively loans works to other museums.

Michael F McElroy/Courtesy of the Rubell Family Collection

It's also not good for the museum-going public. Collectors are often the link between artists and museums — go to any major exhibition and you'll see the words "on loan from" a private collection. Those words also come with prestige for the artist. If that model breaks down, it could make it hard for living artists to create work that's museum-worthy.

Art As A Lifestyle

For many longtime collectors, watching an artist evolve is part of the appeal. Mera Rubell and her husband, Don, have been collecting work by living artists since the 1960s. She says, "What makes collecting contemporary art so profoundly different is the relationship to the artist."

Mera is also passionate about being part of the community (of galleries, museums and curators) that helps the artist. "Once you get involved inside of that universe, it's endlessly enriching and life sustaining," she says.

The Rubells are old school. They own [one of largest, private, contemporary collections in the world](#) — a collection that's also open to the public and which they actively loan to other museums. Rarely do they consider selling an art work.

And the Miami couple doesn't worry about young collectors who start out thinking of art as a commodity. Don Rubell says the art world is so seductive that, eventually, they'll want to live with the art forever.