

Dynamic wave of French collectors

PARIS

Independent networks are shaking up and globalizing the arts scene

BY DEVORAH LAUTER

When Sandra Mulliez received a private Facebook message from a stranger inviting her to see the work of Armen Rotch, a little-known Armenian artist based in Paris, she hesitated, but only

for a split-second.

"I thought, 'I never do this. I'm going to do this,'" said Ms. Mulliez, the Brazilian-born art collector who founded the nonprofit organization SAM Arts Projects in 2009 with her French husband, Amaury Mulliez, to promote and finance French artists internationally, as well as foreign artists from emerging countries within France.

Ms. Mulliez arranged to meet the artist's wife, Gilda Guegamian, who drove her to Mr. Rotch's studio in a suburb southeast of Paris.

Now the stairwell windows and one of

the larger rooms at the SAM Arts headquarters in the 14th Arrondissement of Paris, are draped with Mr. Rotch's sculptural paintings, which are fabricated from tea bags. The exhibition of Mr. Rotch's work, along with works by the Brazilian artist Brigida Baltar, will be part of the "Parcours V.I.P." — a circuit of major galleries and exhibitions shown to important guests — at the 39th International Contemporary Art Fair in Paris, or FIAC, for its French acronym, which is running from Thursday through Sunday.

"This is fantastic," said Ms. Mulliez,

watching the couple install the exhibition earlier this month. Gesturing in the air in wide strokes, Ms. Mulliez said she liked the "deconstructed," larger piece of Mr. Rotch's work, where tea bags were ripped from parts of a larger canvas, leaving behind stains. "I can't explain what they are, but I like it," she said.

Ms. Mulliez is one of a growing number of "activist" art collectors and gallerists in France who, alongside collecting artworks, are looking to support artists and to better involve them — and often France as a whole — in the international contemporary art world. They aim to do this partly by promoting French artists abroad and at international venues at home and partly by exhibiting lesser-known contemporary foreign artists in France, which opens up the French art scene. But they face an uphill battle.

For years, French participation in the contemporary art world has been viewed as relatively sluggish compared to its British, Chinese, German and American counterparts. This has been attributed in part to the country's largely state-funded arts system, which, while ensuring a plentiful flow of money, was also seen to bias the art market and limit the dynamism of the arts scene, by imposing its own criteria as to what constitutes great art. Another possible factor is a tendency to hide evidence of material success, with many French collectors storing art works rather than displaying them.

As the state has increasingly had trouble funding ambitious projects in the arts and has reduced its budget, however, independently funded networks and individuals have chosen to step in where the state has fallen back, supporting artists and trying to internationalize the French scene, while a small but growing number of collectors have chosen to exhibit parts or all of their private collections to the public.

Inspired by collectors abroad, and a few pioneers at home, France has, in the past few years, "produced a generation of people that are actually quite activist and quite militant," said Jennifer Flay, the director of the FIAC. These art patrons, she added, are "proving that France is not only producing art, but that collectors are actually producers of cultural energy, cultural instruments, and that they can be very effective."

Ms. Mulliez, whose organization includes a prize for emerging artists and a residency program, said she believes in taking risks to support new talents and building international networks with the aim of helping artists get noticed abroad. SAM Arts funds and helps organize independent projects and museum exhibitions for contemporary artists in France and abroad, while also acting as a kind of public relations agent for little-known artists. "When the artist arrives here, nobody knows who he is, when he leaves... This is like a trampoline," she said.

She recently organized a prolonged exhibition of the works of her organization's artists at the Museu Brasileiro da Escultura in São Paulo and is planning a new show in Mexico. "I see these good projects and I want to help them happen," she said. "You have to help... and there's less public money, so you've got to invest yourself."

The French collector Steve Rosenblum, who, with his wife, Chiara Rosenblum, started one of France's first private-gone-public collections, Rosenblum Collection & Friends, agrees that art patrons have to take risks in order to help artists.

"Hiding work in a warehouse or a house is the opposite of what an artist wants," said Mr. Rosenblum, one of the founders of the French e-commerce Web site Pixmania. The couple opened a large space in the 13th Arrondissement in Paris in 2010. Their next display, "Crossing

mirrors," an interplay between contemporary and tribal art, opens Thursday to tie in with the opening of the FIAC.

Alongside the couple's own works, collectors from around the world are invited to loan works to the space (hence the "Friends" concept). "We said we'll take the risk, and exhibit, and we'll support artists, especially when they're young," Mr. Rosenblum said.

"We also show artists who are well-known abroad, but not necessarily in France," Ms. Rosenblum added, pointing out that as individuals, they are able to take "the risks that institutions can't."

Within the last decade, internationally-minded initiatives by key institutions and individuals in the Paris art scene — like the Palais de Tokyo museum, which exhibits young artists; the Maison Rouge foundation, overseen by

the collector Antoine de Gaudert; and the young collector Guillaume Houzé of Galerie des Galeries — have helped to bring emerging artists from all over France into a wider public view.

The Marcel Duchamp prize, created in 2000 by the Association for the International Diffusion of French Art or Adiaf, which is chaired by the French collector and art patron Gilles Fuchs, is another key tool in bringing French artists to a wider audience. The prize is awarded each year during the FIAC and winners, who include Laurent Grasso, Cyprien Gaillard, Mircea Cantor and Tatiana Trouvé, have gone on to become global art stars. The winners receive €35,000, or about \$45,000, as well as a solo show at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, but, more importantly, they also gain a wider international credibility.

Five laureates of the prize, for example, will be showing their work at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery from Nov. 29 through Jan. 7, in conjunction with FLAX (France Los Angeles Exchange) an organization that works in partnership with the Palais de Tokyo, the Adiaf and the Los Angeles department of cultural affairs to connect emerging French and Californian artists.

The FIAC's success in recent years, meanwhile (this year over 65,000 visitors are expected to attend and more than 180 galleries), continues to attract top international galleries and collectors, providing a crucial opening for French galleries and artists looking to break into the international scene.

"The FIAC's new status is linked to the improved image of contemporary art in France in recent years, and has almost certainly pushed some art lovers to start collecting," said Cyril Mercier, a specialist on the French art scene whose doctoral thesis, completed this year at the Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris III university, focused on the role of collectors in the contemporary French art market. And, he added, many of these collectors take an activist role.

"Collectors are clearly becoming more involved in attempts to distribute French contemporary art more widely throughout the world," said Mr. Mercier.

The French gallery owner Emmanuel Perrotin, who has long had international ambitions for his artists, who include Sophie Calle, Maurizio Cattelan and Xavier Veilhan, and who opened a new space in Hong Kong in May and plans to open another in New York, said that it has become increasingly easy to export French artists abroad. "I have noticed an enormous evolution," Mr. Perrotin said. But, he added, French artists need gallerists or collectors who are willing to take the risk to support them and, crucially, to provide them the means to display their works internationally.

"I start on the principle that it will work," he said of his attitude toward working with new French artists. "You have to dare to do it, and make other galleries want to take these artists as well."

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THE ART OF COLLECTING



FRED MARGAUX

Above, the Paris-based collector Sandra Mulliez, who founded SAM Arts Projects with her husband, Amaury. Right, Steve and Chiara Rosenblum with "Second Home" by Matthew Day Jackson. They founded Rosenblum Collection & Friends in Paris to display their private collection.



Working to bring art to the common man

MUMBAI

Asim Waqif takes debris of everyday life to weave avant-garde installations

BY GAYATRI RANGACHARI SHAH

"I wasn't interested in contemporary art, and I never thought I would become an artist," said Asim Waqif, whose debut European solo show, "Bordel Monstre" (Monstrous Mess), opens at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris on Friday.

But Mr. Waqif, a former architect, said he felt limited designing within the confines of an office, and about seven years ago he started producing avant-garde installations.

For the Palais de Tokyo display, which runs through Jan. 21, Mr. Waqif, whose previous works have incorporated video, sound, dance and sculpture, has used unconventional material, weaving debris — like discarded wood panels, wiring, plastic waste, metal and dry waste — into an elaborate, interactive sculpture.

The 34-year-old multidisciplinary artist described the exhibit as a "means of making people aware of their own movement, to take into account an element of risk in their lives, of being careful and conscious."

In an effort to stimulate all five senses, he built mechanical pedals and electronic panels into the maze-like structure so that spectators could actively engage with the work.

"People will be actors in the work, which includes light and sound," said the show's curator, Daria de Beauvais, by telephone. "It will be a unique expe-



ROMAIN MERIAUX/DÉLABARRE

The Indian artist Asim Waqif with his elaborate sculpture "Bordel Monstre," at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. The work is made of materials including plastic waste and wiring.

rience for the audience because they will be able to hear, see, walk, feel and smell the work."

"Bordel Monstre" is the culmination of Mr. Waqif's fall residency in Paris, which was supported by SAM Art Projects, and is the first exhibition to be displayed in the recently expanded Palais's Music Temple room, a space originally dedicated to creating electronic music. Describing the large room as "challenging to work in," Ms. Beauvais said she was impressed by the artist's ability to make it his own. "The way some people work with canvas, Asim works with space," she said.

Sunita Choraria, a prominent Mumbai-based contemporary art collector, whose

tainability. Since his initial foray into art seven years ago, he has built an oeuvre that comments on India's consumerism and its effect on the environment.

His focus on India's rapid economic development reflects a wider concern here about the price of such growth. Two years ago, Mr. Waqif created "HELP, Jumna's Protest," with his own funds, spending about 60,000 rupees, or \$1,100, to install a work made of plastic bottles, LED lights and a metal frame spelling out "help" on the heavily polluted Yamuna river flowing through Delhi.

"We have such a strong association with water bodies in Indian culture but modern Delhi has been designed with its back to the river," said Mr. Waqif. "The sheer amount of waste and sewage that is dumped into the city has obliterated the river. I tried to recreate the persona of the river goddess coming back using new-age technologies like LED lights."

At a summer residency last year at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, where he was one of 65 artists selected from 2,041, Mr. Waqif deconstructed a studio space and transported the walls to an old, partially open-air shed on campus, where he reinstalled them, and then placed dead wood, moss, leaves, blankets and plastic around the work, to document the way these elements had been incorporated and absorbed, said Sarah Workneh, the co-director of the school, via e-mail.

Mr. Waqif then documented the way changes in the weather and the vagaries of nature affected the work, gradually taking over and harmonizing with the structure. The result, he said, supported his belief that "decay and destruction have an important role to play in adapting to the dynamism of society."

Mr. Waqif grew up in what he describes as the liberal atmosphere of an academic household: his father was dean at Hyderabad Central University and his mother is an Urdu-language schoolteacher. The family is Dawoodi Bohra, a Shiite Islamic subset known for its progressive values, but Mr. Waqif said that as children he and his friends never gave much thought to religion and that even today his work is more informed by his Indian identity than a religious one.

In fact, one of the main concerns of his work, Mr. Waqif says, is the absence of a tactile, experiential aspect to contemporary art. "Marketability has taken away the ability to touch art, to feel it," he said. "It's considered fragile. Art should be viewed as living, evolving, organic." To counterbalance this rarefied approach to art, many of Mr. Waqif's works have an element of interactivity.

"He is challenging a lot of set ideas of what art means to us," said Aparajita Jain, his longtime gallerist at New Delhi's Seven Art Gallery.

Tying in with his desire to make his works physically accessible, and his use of readily available materials, another main concern, he said, is making his art socially accessible, connecting with the Everyman, not just wealthy art collectors and gallerists. His works are often intentionally placed in unglamorous, arbitrary surroundings like abandoned buildings, far from the sleek world of urban galleries.

"I am not hung up on specific materials," Mr. Waqif said. "What's much more interesting is, who can access the work? Who can come see it? Contemporary Indian art is so disjointed from the public. It's elitist. I want to connect with the average person in India."