



SHOWING THE WAY Iwan and Manuela Wirth pose against a Zhang Enli watercolour wall painting titled Four Seasons (2015)

IMAGE: JOHN PHILIPS FOR GETTY AND KEN ADLARD, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH

Prime Movers

International art supremos **Iwan and Manuela Wirth** explain their winning strategy in Asia to **Nione Meakin**

Iwan and Manuela Wirth, the premier power couple of the global art world, have been priming the Asian market for years with a drip feed of artists little known locally, showing their work at Art Basel in Hong Kong and its predecessor. It's a technique that pays off handsomely. One of the artists they represent, French-American Louise Bourgeois, was relatively unknown here when the Wirths introduced her work at the Hong Kong International Art Fair in 2011, but by October last year the dedicated duo had helped develop Bourgeois' reputation to the point that one of her bronzes, *Quarantania*, went to auction in Seoul and sold for HK\$36 million, the sale's top price.

The Asian "discovery" of Bourgeois is a neat illustration of not only the Wirths' influence in the global art market, but also of Hong Kong's increasing importance to it. As co-presidents of the Hauser & Wirth empire—five international galleries (and a sixth to open this month in downtown Los Angeles) and a dizzying roster of world-class artists—the Swiss husband and wife occupy a revered position among artists and dealers, highlighted by their rise last year to the number one spot in *Art Review* magazine's Power 100.

Iwan, a boyish 46-year-old, is a shrewd businessman renowned for creating markets for Hauser & Wirth artists, and Manuela grew up surrounded by great art owned by her mother, one of Switzerland's finest private collectors. Paul McCarthy is another of their success stories. The American political provocateur's main income came from his job as a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles before his first Hauser & Wirth show. At last year's Art Basel in Hong Kong, McCarthy's sculpture *White Snow, Bambi* sold for US\$2.8 million.

"If an artist is great but there's no market for them, we feel something is wrong," says Iwan. Adds Manuela, "For me, it's always a question of, is it truly great art? Is it important? Is it relevant? Do we love the person and do we love the work?" At which Iwan laughs, "I want to know if there's a market." Not every gamble pays off. Iwan maintains they were "too early" when they staged the Japanese post-war installation artist Tetsumi Kudo in London last year. "Is it over? Absolutely not. In two years we'll do it again."

The couple's commitment to the artists they represent, who also include Turner Prize-winner Martin Creed, hyperrealist sculptor Ron Mueck, Swiss video artist Pipilotti Rist and the late American installation artist Jason Rhoades, inspires fierce loyalty. In 24 years they have lost not one to another gallery.

Iwan launched Hauser & Wirth in 1992, partnering with his now mother-in-law Ursula Hauser; he would go on to marry her daughter four years later. At that time, major artists were only presented in London, Paris and New York. "We had to find a different way to compete," says Iwan. "It's not so much that we chose to work with emerging artists—I'd love to have worked with Gerhard Richter—but those who were interested in us were the more complex, less commercial artists."

Their inaugural signing was Rist, the first of many female artists the gallery has championed. While Iwan describes himself as a feminist, he admits the decision was also a practical one. "We ended up with great women artists because there were opportunities—people weren't representing them." Bourgeois joined the gallery in its first year and was with it until her death in 2010 aged 98. "She was always one of our favourite artists," says Manuela. "She's the mother of all the female artists in our gallery—and the male ones." Supported both financially and emotionally, the artists grew up with the

WEB SITE Louise Bourgeois' 2003 sculpture *Spider Couple* can be seen at Art Basel in Hong Kong this year

gallery. Their works now sell for millions, but the ethos remains. "We are a family," says Iwan, who is godfather to Jason Rhoades and Rachel Khedoori's daughter Rubi. "We know about each other's love lives, relationships to parents, to children—it's 360 degrees, 24/7."

The couple are risk-takers, says Iwan, who made his first sales as a seven-year-old flogging his own creations to workers at his grandfather's factory before opening a commercial gallery at 16—"It was the cheapest way to be surrounded by art all day." Their 2014 conversion of a dilapidated farm in the sleepy English county of Somerset—the family's adopted home since 2006—is a prime example of this. With galleries in Zurich, London and New York, opening a multipurpose arts centre in Bruton appeared to be a left-field move if not a suicidal one. It

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proved anything but. Within nine months the gallery had welcomed 100,000 visitors, all seduced by art, architecture, education and food united in one aspirational package. Their LA gallery, which will be helmed by influential museum curator Paul Schimmel, builds on this model of art as lifestyle, with an education programme, bookstore, bar and restaurant.

The Wirths are currently weighing up the risks of opening a gallery in Asia. "It's still

early days but we are keeping our options open," says Iwan. While they represent Chinese painter Zhang Enli and are working on signing another "major Asian Chinese artist," Asia is "a different world every year," he says. "The appetite for art is very bullish and there are very strong Chinese buyers, but we feel it's only really beginning, especially for galleries. The great successes have been for auction houses, then come the fairs, then people will explore galleries more. Asia is going to grow to become one of the major forces in the art market but, for now, we need to explain more about what we do and who we are."

Work of quality and substance is slowly climbing back up the agenda, Iwan feels. "There's been a lot of noise in the past few years—people buying with their ears more than their eyes—but we feel some sense coming in. It's not as easy any more and that's better for the market, better for the artists, better for interesting conversations. A year ago we would only have talked about the market. I'm glad the conversation is about art again."

For now, the Wirths' focus will continue to be on introducing artists new to the Asian market. This year their offerings at Art Basel in Hong Kong will include works by the late abstract expressionist Philip Guston, whose estate they recently took on, and *Spider Couple*, a pair of giant, sprawling bronze and silver arachnids by an artist who is now much more familiar to Asians—Louise Bourgeois. ❶



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