

In Dialogue with Donald Johnson Montenegro

Pavneet Saini & Derek Saurack are Teen Curators at the Hill Art Foundation.

They spoke with Donald Johnson Montenegro, Director at Luhring Augustine Gallery

Location: Hill Art Foundation, New York City

Pavneet: Good evening, my name is Pavneet Saini and this is my partner Derek Saurack. We are high school students currently participating in the Hill Art Foundation's Teen Curators program.

Derek: We are gathered here today to have a short conversation with Mr. Donald Johnson Montenegro. The director of the Luhring Augustine Gallery which represents Christopher Wool. We will be discussing Mr. Montenegro's experience working in the world of contemporary art and how it helped shape who he is today.

Derek: Hope you're doing well Mr. Montenegro, ready to get started?

Donald: Ready

Derek: How did you come to be an art dealer?

Donald: I think the first step was probably being a student at Cornell University. I was an English major and I took a class that kind of changed my career path and my life in some ways. Which is a class that was taught by a very important Museum director, Marcia Tucker, who I think I was telling you guys about earlier today. She basically got fired from her first job as the curator at the Whitney and went on to found the New Museum, and she taught a class at Cornell that I took on kind of a whim. I was always interested in art and art making but I never thought or knew what a career in the art world would be like or how one could go about beginning that. But after taking her class, I just knew that whatever it was, I wanted to participate in the world that she did, because she just had this infectious personality--this way of conveying everything great that art can be and do.

Pavneet: So, you caught on to her enthusiasm?

Donald: Yeah, exactly.

Pavneet: Can you tell us about what you do at Luhring Augustine?

Donald: Sure, so I've been at Luhring Augustine for a little over eight years now and my title is

Director and what I do basically is spend my time between kind of the artist liaison part of my job, which is keeping in touch with a certain core group of artists in the gallery program. And I take care of them. I help strategize with them about their careers and also help them with, you know, more kind of nuanced small things in their day-to-day practices and production matters, you know with my team working on shipping and logistical things.

Any number of things from the highly kind of conceptual—in terms of like the direction of their practice, to the very kind of quotidian and personal. So that's one half of my job. I would say the other half of my job is as a salesperson for the gallery and selling these artworks to institutions and private collections.

Pavneet: So you are also in kind of like marketing

Donald: Yeah, I mean we are kind of a midsize Gallery. So whereas a larger Gallery that's more like a kind of corporate institution would probably have a press team and a marketing team and a this and a that, we tend to be kind of a Chief cook and bottle washer at a midsize Gallery—which is a really exciting thing to me. You kind of get to be involved in all aspects of an artist's career. And also, we think about our presentations at art fairs or what's the best place to advertise and because my job is a highly social one and it requires being connected with a lot of people in the art World. It means we kind of are well suited to kind of like the put together the bigger picture things. So a lot of people that I have personal relationships with are more on the kind of magazine side of things or on the curatorial side of things. And that's one of the great things about the art world that is people who are of an older generation than me will tell you that it's not what it used to be. It used to be much smaller and much more personal. It's still a very small and very personal world to work in, which is what I enjoy about it and it means that we really got to kind of put things together—put people together in an exciting way. And one of the great things about art is that art can be the most powerful and most interesting conversation starter in the world.

Pavneet: So earlier you talked about how your gallery is not that big, right, so if you want to exhibit the art internationally you would have to speak to other gallery directors?

5 minutes

Donald: Sure,

Pavneet: And I thought the process: what if one of the gallery directors declines your request? How do you go on?

Donald: I guess what you were referring to is now there are very large kind of corporate galleries. That might have a gallery in London and a gallery in New York and a Gallery in Los Angeles Gallery and a gallery in Hong Kong and etcetera. We've prided ourselves always in being a gallery that is very artist centric and is very much about a kind of personal touch. You can't really have a personal touch, if you have locations around the world, you know. We like to welcome people at the gallery and make them feel like they're coming into our family, and that's the way we like to handle our customer service and our kind of level of intimacy with the people that we deal with. So yes, that is to say that it is in many ways a matter of choice that we have remained a smaller gallery in terms of number of locations. But we're also kind of a Large gallery if you think of Lühring Augustine's reputation and impact on the cultural sphere. To go back to your question, Yes, because we're New York-centric Gallery, there are times when, it's in the best interest of our artists and of our own gallery for our artists to exhibit with galleries in other parts of the world. So through the relationships we have with other galleries, we help our artists often times to find placement in some of these other galleries. Sometimes they approach us, sometimes they say, "wow you are working with this incredibly exciting new artist, Simone Leigh. We would love to show her work as well." Or sometimes it's you know strategizing with an artist saying, okay, what ideally would be the right gallery for you in Brazil, if that's a place where you want to exhibit? Who would be the optimal partner There? Not just because of the reputation of the gallery. And the way that we know that they handle business. but also in terms of that particular gallery's program, what makes most sense for the context of your work?

Pavneet: An artwork that stood out to us was Christopher Wool's *Untitled 2007* It seemed to depict to us the indecisive human nature where every mark no matter how many times one makes to erase something was futile and It's something that might bring pain to the brain. That was our interpretation of the work. What aspects of *Untitled 2007* would you highlight to entice a potential buyer?

Donald: To entice a potential buyer? Well I think it's an interesting question because it brings many questions with it. One being that selling things, which you know is part of what I do for a living, is a matter of personal style. In many regards, a lot of people speak about art in a certain way. But another person who also sells art might not speak about it. I mean obviously art can be read in many different ways. And it's something that has a lot to do with, you know, the knowledge that each viewer brings.

So, how do I go about answering this question? I guess many people might speak to a potential buyer about the history of a particular painting or the market of an artist. Many people might

talk about the art historical importance of this artist. Some people like to speak mostly about process. You know, how did the artist go about doing this? Some people might want to speak about it in terms of like their own personal reading. I think a lot of it is being able to judge your audience right. There are some people who want to know, how did this artist physically make this work? What is their process here? And some people really want to know what this work of art quote on quote means or how it functions in the world of images.

Pavneet: So it's kind of like selling to a family in comparison to a professional?

Donald: Sure, you could say that

Pavneet: So you just have to kind of match their needs?

Donald: Yeah, not to say tell them what they want to hear, because I think when you're selling something you have to be genuine. At least I've only ever been successful in speaking about art honestly and really saying what I believe. But do I want to focus more on matters of the market, or do I want to focus more on matters of process or matters of content? I think with that particular painting that you're talking about and Christopher's work in general.

10:00

There are also going to be a few people are who much more educated about Christopher's work and a lot of the work that I would have to do in and introducing the painting to them they've already done because they follow the artist over their career or they've done a lot of studies in terms of where the market is for that artist.

What I tend to speak about with a painting like that or in that particular series of Christopher's is mostly kind of content and process based because with Christopher those two things are very intertwined for him, and the meaning of a painting or what he's trying to convey is very much tied into the production of the painting. So there is when you study art history, a very famous drawing. Let's see if I get the history of this particular work correct. Basically, the artist Robert Rauschenberg asked an idol of his, Willem de Kooning, if he could have one of his drawings to erase it. So de Kooning found one of his most like, you know, really worked on drawings--like really something that would be very hard to erase with a lot of different kinds of marks really pressed in there and gave it to Robert Rauschenberg. I mean they obviously had a good relationship, but Rauschenberg's gesture was to take de Kooning's drawing and erase it. So what does that mean? What does it mean to erase the marks with the artwork of someone that you respect and admire? I mean, it's a very oedipal thing, right--you know kind of an act against the

father figure. But it also has to do with collaboration and with any number of things that you can read into this, right. And it's a complex act and a very interesting one.

Pavneet: So what was like the moral of the story? You can't technically erase things?

Donald: No because he did, very successfully erase it. But I mean you have to take in certain historical moments because De Kooning was part of this generation of very kind of macho painters and they were what the abstract expressionists were about, you know-- the importance of the actual gesture. The physicality of it was the important thing, and so for an artist of the younger generation to erase that, that's doing something that's less about mark making but more of a conceptualized gesture. It's just a really fascinating thing to think about and talk about right. So the reason I'm bringing this up is because when I think about those works of Christopher's that you're referencing, Christopher's almost taking that act--what Rauschenberg did to that De Kooning drawing-- and he's doing it to himself. It's like a self-inflicted denial, you know. If Christopher made these marks on the surface of the painting and he's taken a material that allows him to kind of wipe that clean so that he's negating his own mark making, so what does that mean do for you as a viewer? Does that make you think about doubt? Does that make you think about you know, the fact that in art it may be like in music how the silence is as important as the musical note, you know what I mean? I think there are any number of really fascinating ways to read into that painting, and I think that a short way of answering your question, which I really kind of rambled on here, is that I think you just try to get people excited about. Because if it's something that excites you, you want to kind of convey that to them.

And I always try to engage people in conversation. Right now, I'm kind of just talking and lecturing, but if we were talking and you were someone who was interested in [the painting], I would like to have a real like back and forth conversation with you. What it is you find important in the painting or that excites you? Because that's the reason I got into this, and the artwork is a point of departure for conversation and if you have an animated fun conversation, that makes a great dinner party. That's what makes a great sales interaction. I mean you can think about even simple things, like going in and buying a new pair of shoes. So, if you had a really interesting engagement with the person who was selling you that object, you're kind of more likely to buy it and to enjoy the experience and to then be loyal to that brand.

Derek: So compared to Wool's contemporaries and artists who make similar works. What factors make Wool's body of work such a good investment?

15:00

Donald: Such a good investment. I mean, listen, from the from the standpoint of an art dealer, we for the most part talk about or try to talk about how try focus on the kind of language of art and the importance of art in the world and also, most importantly, I think the joys of living with art and how that can be transformative right--actually like living with the work of art being inspired with it having it in your personal space. That said, you can't deny the fact that today's art world is very much about the market, and there are some people who come in and that's what they want to talk about. For us, sometimes, that raises a red flag when a collector walks in and wants to just talk about the market. That suggests to me that they're buying it as an investment and not as something that they want to live with or be inspired by. Now that's just a reality of the moment we live in, and we can't we can't deny that. And I'm also not going to be rude to someone who comes inside and says, "why would this be a good investment?" or "how is it gonna appreciate in value?" With Christopher there's a very strong market. You know the art market has dubbed him one of the most sought-after artists. So you know, there's a very clear track record with him in terms of his works appreciating in value. I also think probably the way that I would answer that question if someone were to engage me with that while we were talking about the sale of an artwork, is you know that Christopher has already shown through his work, but also through the massive kind of institutional interest in his work to be one of if not the most important American painters of his generation. So he will go down in history as one of the great artists of our time.

You know when that... sure, like that means that it's a safe bet. But also, that it's about legacy and about importance. You know there have never been more artists making art than there are staying of course, but there were also many, many artists working at the same time as Caravaggio, you know who are now kind of forgotten, and Caravaggio is the one artist in that group that we remember--or Monet. You know, the artists that history deems most important tend to be very sought-after in the marketplace afterwards. Sometimes artist obviously get rediscovered and that's another important part of what we do and what we try to do. But I would say all signs of what makes an artist important to the world and to the language of art and to the way we think about the world through art, would suggest that Christopher is a very safe bet for the lack of a better way saying it.

Derek: So you feel like he's kind of the poster boy of this era of art?

Donald: So to speak. I think Christopher and a couple of other artists really took painting to a completely different place at a very--let's call it a challenging time of history of art when painting was really considered to be uninteresting and a dead art form. They injected it with a completely

new life for us and saw that painting could ask different questions and also that it wasn't just this kind of tidy, easy way of making art. There was real meat still left on the dining plate of painting.

Pavneet: So earlier you said if a painting can't be sold, you'll increase the price, right?

Donald: I mean I was saying that in kind of a tongue and cheek way, but yeah.

Pavneet: And so what impact do you think assigning a certain amount of money has on the art's meaning?

I think that that's a really smart question and often times it's impossible to look at art without thinking about its value. Especially in today's day and age. You can read the art section of the New York Times or you can read the results of an auction and you know it's just these astronomical figures that get reported on. So a lot of people are kind of entranced by art the art market because of these huge, huge values that get traded for you know, objects. You know that we're not talking about large amounts of land or real estate, we're talking sometimes about a small painting and it is it is shocking.

20:00

I think that it becomes impossible in many cases to think about art without the value. Until often times something is placed in the museum, right? Then you just think of all these things as having no value in there. They're protected They're no longer being traded on the market. They're in a safe place and we can view them just for their aesthetic qualities, hopefully. But then you think about an artist who might produce work that has an incredibly high production cost, right, like Jeff Koons' sculptures. And it's impossible to look at a Jeff Koons sculpture and not think about the money. Not just because those works of art command incredibly high prices but also because Koons is--to use your term--like a poster boy for like the art market and these large prices. But also his work is very specifically also about that in a way. You know about moving sums of money, about high production value, and about the kind of almost luxury quality of everything...and that's not uninteresting. I mean, there's plenty to say about where we are as a society in terms of what we value and where we place money, and I think that if you're someone who's involved in the arts, it's nice to see that one of the things that our culture has deemed most valuable is art. I think that's a very optimistic way of looking at it and a very naive way of looking at it. But at the end of the day, that's how I choose to look at it I think that, yes, some of the sums of money spent on art could probably be spent in a different way to the benefit of our culture. And I'm not here to judge on that, but I do think that it does say something about

a culture that we've decided to value art so highly. And some people might say that that's just because it's an asset class now, it can be moved around. Sure, you can take that approach to it, and it's very true. But I just choose to be more upbeat about it.

Derek: What process do you have to go through to sell art and present it at an exhibition? And how do you collaborate with your team at Luhring Augustine to do this?

Donald: So I mean from the beginning, let's say we decide we're going to do an exhibition with an artist--an artist we already represent. We say, okay, we'll find the right time. So often times an artist is like working in their studio, you know, at all times and at a certain point they become ready to show a new body of work. Or sometimes you tell an artist it's time for you to have another show, let's put an exhibition on the schedule. So once you have the date confirmed for an exhibition, the artist obviously is like going to work on producing things. Sometimes we're involved in that in terms of, you know, helping an artist to produce sculpture or helping them to get a print made. But often times it's just them working on their own. Then as the work is completed, we obviously have it photographed, we have it inventoried, we meet with the artist. And also, the group of salespeople at the gallery, the owners of the gallery, meet to talk about how the work is going to be priced. That's the conversation about where the market is, where the works are, how the works were priced previously, and should we raise the price for this body of work? So you have a conversation about that. You also have to think about marketing, and you have to write the press release and you do advertising and all of these things that go into the beginnings of an exhibition, and they involve every aspect of the gallery's team to your question. So everyone from obviously the people who handle press relations also we try to get our art handlers involved at a very early stage because they have incredible expertise about how to install a show so they can bring certain things or start brainstorming about certain things.

You know if we're going to do at an exhibition of new media arts, we might have to get special kinds of monitors or take into account certain acoustic issues and paneling. So it's actually a very complex endeavor often to put up an exhibition which requires a lot of people working pretty hard for something that ends up only being up for a month or two.

25:00

So we do a lot of that. One of the great pluses of doing this job is getting to travel extensively. And when you get to travel, we always make it a point to visit artists in their studios at the cities we go to, go to local museums and to look at other arts that other exhibitors are showing at art fairs. Or even just, you know, by doing research online-- to find out about new artists. It's sort of

always having your eyes open and always being curious about being on the lookout for different artists.

So often times it's us bringing artist to the rest of our colleagues of the gallery. What do you guys think about this? Is this an artist we should engage? Would this be an artist that makes sense for the gallery? And as I alluded to earlier when we were meeting with the group, there are also many situations in which our kind of expansive network in between the collectors, the curators, and the critics who are involved with the gallery, They might make a recommendation to us or our colleagues and other galleries as well.

Pavneet: So when talking to a prospective buyer, how do you determine with them what they're looking for when buying? I feel like you already touched on that before, but how might you frame a particular artwork to that buyer to fit their needs?

Donald: Well, I think that when we were meeting with the group, I think you were the one who brought up this idea that you might someone who you're meeting for the first time about their collection. what are the other artists that they buy? What excites them about art? Then you can advise them and kind of cater the conversation to what it is that might excite them about art.

And I think one of the fun things about art and one of things that collectors love doing and curators love doing and viewers love doing is kind of trading notes, you know., our business is very much based on trust, right? So it's about personal relationships. So often times it's telling someone like listen, I don't think this is the right thing for you. Or have you seen this exhibition of this artist that we don't represent but may be represented by another gallery that makes sense for you, and you should go look at that. And so, yeah, it's a lot of kind of finding the people who you trust and the people who have a similar sensibility to you or a similar eye. And just, I don't know, to me it's about enthusiasm of the work and of another conversation.

Derek: Thank you for speaking with us.

Donald: Sure. My pleasure!

Pavneet: Yeah thank you. This concludes our interview with you.

Donald: It was fun thank you for asking questions.