



ART REVIEW: Staff Art Show at Christie's Is an Impressive Inside Job

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by Charles A. Riley II

After 30 years as an auction correspondent covering [Christie's](#) salesrooms in New York and London, I have a mental warehouse chock full of close encounters with masterpieces and power players.

Working on a cover story about Vincent van Gogh's [Portrait of Dr. Gachet](#), I was there the night it set a world record \$82.5 million in 1990. I pored over catalogues and grazed on muffins, smoked salmon and champagne at previews for paintings by Picasso, Modigliani, Monet, Rubens, Brueghel and Rothko, among so many others.

I casually exchanged smiles with celebrities like Hugh Grant, Bill Cosby, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Bill Gates's father (who bought a codex by Leonardo—da Vinci not DiCaprio). But none of these experiences offered the intimacy and backstage feel of a recent thought-provoking tour of Christie's "[Untitled: Insider Art Show](#)," the auction house's annual sale of works by employees.

Since its start 17 years ago the summertime rite has been a point of pride at the world renowned auction house. With 45 works by art handlers, department experts, and other behind-the-scenes denizens of the company, and prices starting at \$200, it is not on the scale of the blue-chip "Imp and Mod" sales, but the white-gloved hands that move the Monets prove to be gifted in the ability to make some terrific art.

The show is flawlessly installed (the team of handlers takes care of its own) in the sumptuous first-floor galleries where top lots are usually showcased. And part of my enjoyment stemmed from comparing the staff offerings with recollections of the blockbuster pieces that had hung in places of honor.

Where the record-setting [Modigliani Nu Couche](#) once ruled the space reserved for the cover lots, the wall was dominated by an elegant "combine"—superimposed sculptural elements on a towering grid of graphite and pigment transfer works on paper a la Rauschenberg. Titled *Echo of t.h.e.d.*, the piece was created by the talented [Lars van Dooren](#), whose day job is warehouse technician working in facility logistics.



"Echo of the e.d" by Lars Van Dooren, 2016. Graphite and pigment transfer on paper, 29.50 x 23.50 inches. Courtesy of Christie's.

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On another power wall, *Marie*, a superb painting by [Katelyn Kraunelis](#), a publicist, combined a deft partial portrait in pencil of the back of a young woman's head, braided hair and folded arms with an elegant blue and white floral border. Perhaps it was because I had seen paintings by Picasso on that wall through the years that I thought of the portrait of his wife Olga Khokhlova (at the "Unfinished" show at the Met Breuer, [reviewed here](#)) which similarly combined a black-and-white drawing of the ballerina's pudgy arms with a more finished painted section.



"Marie" by Katelyn Kraunelis, 2016. graphite, acrylic and oil on paper, 24 x 18 inches. Courtesy of Christie's.

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There were several admirably crafted paintings in the show, including the spectacularly theatrical feathers layered on an abstract cloud of color in art handler [Aaron Young](#)'s *One More Stripe*, and a terrific tumbling installation of triangular wedges of gold and orange by Dan Bina (another art handler).



"One More Stripe" by Aaron Young, 2016. Acrylic and collage on canvas, 52 x 38 inches. Courtesy of Christie's.

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There were so many other highlights that I can scarcely do justice to all. Three sculptors whose work I would gladly follow: data manager [Noelle Choy](#), showing an endearing but disturbing pair of head puppets; researcher in the Contemporary department [Joey Stiegelman](#), whose mesmerizing and exquisitely made *Light Cube I* channeled Yayoi Kusama and Dan Flavin; and production graphic artist Jacqueline Liang, who made *Nothing Gold Can Stay*, a psychological reading of Robert Frost's eclogue.



"Light Cube 1" by Joey Stiegelman, 2016. Mirrored acrylic with neon tubing and wire, 12 x 12 x 12 inches. Courtesy of Christie's.

Work by art handler [Maho Kino](#) shows real expertise at sugar lift in the etching studio with a great stock of Japanese handmade paper. I don't know much about jewelry, but I love Matisse and gallery assistant [Denise Paglina](#)'s *Ode* to that artist in silver and opal struck just the right balance between the sinuous forms of Matisse's paper cutouts and, with just a drop of mineral fire, the radiance of his colors.

Because the venue was Christie's, where the correct attribution of Old Masters is a high-stakes game, it was amusing to see senior client representative Nicole Huter's witty take on an Old Master gem in her little oil study *Circa 1700-2015 CE* in an amazing frame.

One of the strengths of the group was photography, including a trio of exquisitely printed and lovingly observed photos by [Jennifer Cuminale](#), a publicist who has a painterly eye for color and a great sense of composition. The ghostly shadow of a lamp in a Portuguese street scene, slightly off the plumb line of verticality, stays in the memory.

A vertiginous trio of aerial images shot from a cliff overlooking breaking waves by Christie's staff photographer [Mark Babushkin](#) attests to a similarly fearless engagement with color. And I was also taken by the grainy texture of image processor [Christine Barrett](#)'s black-and-white photography.



"Aerial 1" by Mark Babushkin, 2016. Photograph, 24 x 24 inches.
Courtesy of Christie's.

A consultant to the Christie's photo studio, [Cameron Neilson](#), presented his commanding image of the Brooklyn Bridge with clouds scudding overhead. This piece brought to mind not just Walker Evans but Hart Crane, who used an iconic Evans image as the frontispiece to a limited edition of "The Bridge."

A breakout story in the show is Maite Zubizarreta, whose crisp yet enigmatic architectural series, *Casas a Celeste*, landed her a gallery show in Chile, where she is a senior assistant in client management.

I laughed out loud at the offering of [Tim Balboni](#), a temp in creative services. His *Submerging Artists* are photographic takedowns of cash cows Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons. But the sharp tip of satire raises a debatable point. Balboni poses the timeless Shakespearean problem: What's in a name?"



"Submerging Artist 2" by Tim Balboni, 2016. C-print mounted on board, 20 x 24 inches. Courtesy of Christie's.

In several interesting ways, the staff show at Christie's directly addresses the nagging question of the importance of a name brand to the way we respond to art. The curatorial gatekeeper issue and what fame means in terms of the attention and the money that is paid to a piece of art can be considered at the point where the "free market" decides so publicly who is hot and who is not. The eloquent version of the unknown artist toiling invisibly is Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" with its wise line: "Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen."

A major auction house during the season is an express. Thousands of works are evaluated, stored, catalogued, estimated, moved, hung, lit, sold, settled and shipped each week by the unheralded staff. During the auction, handlers silently produce the choreographed pavanne of treasures that wheel into view on the turntable. Like a movie crew, they have to stay out of the shot.

There are exceptions. Just before the staff show, The New Yorker had just given Leonardo di Caprio's buddy Loic Gouzer, "The Daredevil of the Auction World," the full-blown profile treatment. The article tracked in mouth-watering detail his jet-set existence, swanning around the Hamptons and Cote d'Azur cutting elaborate deals and building the reputations of artists.

More often, the auctioneer is the face of the house. One of the very best of them, in my view, was Christopher Burge, who retired from the podium in 2012. A regular spokesman on TV, he even had cameo appearances in movies. Yet his legendary rise to the summit of the art market began innocuously at the front desk in London, where he gained a reputation for his alert eye when a consignor brought in a winner.

After this marvelous staff show, never again will I blow by the desk attendants without wondering what they do in the studio on weekends.

BASIC FACTS: "Untitled: Insider Art Show" was presented from July 28 to August 11, 2016 at Christie's Auction House, 20 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, NY 10020. www.christies.com/features/The-unknown-artists-of-Christies-7556-3.aspx

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