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How to Find “Real” Art: Allison Cohen Guides The Way

BY PHILIPPA P.B. HUGHES

You got rid of the Monet Water Lilies poster years ago and now you're interested in buying “real” art, the kind that might appreciate in value and doesn't just match your sofa. Maybe you even want to collect art. Interest in contemporary art has soared along with attendance at ultra hip art fairs like Miami Basel and New York's Armory Show where you can watch Martha Stewart and Keanu Reeves vying for works from the latest hot artists. Under these circumstances, buying art can intimidate even the most ardent art lover, especially one on a limited budget and little time to follow the vagaries of the art market. It doesn't help that a perpetual aura of fear and impermeability lingers around fine art galleries. That's where Allison Cohen and her art consultancy, Sightline, step in.

Painting The Picture

“Sightline connects people to art,” says Cohen. “We guide our clients through the complex world of art to find works that fit their sensibilities, lifestyle and budget.” Finding art for one's home or workspace is not like hunting down a dress for a party, though. According to Cohen, “The art search is a process that involves asking questions about who we are and what inspires us, what makes us feel a certain way—happy, challenged, calm—and then searching for the artwork that will enrich our space and ourselves.”

The Sightline process begins with a one-on-one consultation in which Cohen assesses the client's space and learns about his or her art-buying goals. She encourages the client to do most of the talking



Allison Cohen, Art Consultant

and listens carefully to what the client has to say. Only then does Cohen begin her search. “I focus first on aesthetics. Will the client want to live with this piece in her home,” she asks herself. “But I also consider the potential for market appreciation.” Though risky, some clients look at art as an investment. “Art collecting can be a way to diversify your investment portfolio,” advises Cohen. “But,

unlike stock, art is an asset that you can see and enjoy every day.”

After Cohen finds a selection of art that meets the guidelines she and the client have discussed, she prepares a tailored artwork portfolio for the client. The portfolio includes artist names, pricing, descriptions of works, representative images and links to web sites with additional examples of each

artist's work. "The portfolio is the main tool I use to 'filter' the art world for each client." The client reviews the portfolio and gives her feedback, which narrows the search further. Cohen then accompanies the client through galleries and art fairs to see the works up close, and organizes a studio visit if the client wishes to meet an artist. If the client chooses to buy a piece of art, Cohen then assists in negotiating the purchase and even helps install the new work.

Perhaps her greatest skill is in being able to read people well. "I have a good batting average when it comes to finding art that people love," declares Cohen.

Drawing On Experience

The connection between people and art began long before the 35-year-old Cohen even met her first clients. Cohen founded Sightline three years ago after leaving the law firm of Covington & Burling where she advised artist and museum clients and built an expertise in art-related law. Cohen's art knowledge had been forming, though, since she was a baby. Avid art collectors and patrons, her parents instilled a passion in Cohen for contemporary art from a very young age and surrounded her with top-notch art in their Washington area home. "Seeing paintings by Roy Lichtenstein and Gene Davis around the house certainly honed my eye for art," says Cohen.

Cohen studied art history in college and then developed an ever-expanding network of relationships with leading galleries and artists in Washington and around the country. She travels to major art centers, such as New York and Los Angeles, several times each year and attends numerous art fairs, which provide an efficient way to meet many U.S. and international artists and galleries. "I know what's out there and I know how to get it," assures Cohen.

Sculpting Clients And Building The Business

Though she faces little competition in D.C., Cohen finds it challenging to market her services. "It is sometimes difficult for even the most sophisticated professional to fully grasp how I can help them connect to art and build a modest art collection." Much of what she does is demystify art collecting and educate potential collectors on what it means to collect. Washington saw its first contemporary art fair in April and Cohen was there to lead groups of new and potential collectors through the convention center. She enjoys hosting art open houses that feature works by artists in a variety of media at entry-level price points. "These low-pressure events provide a great opportunity

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to get some experience looking at and talking about art."

Cohen has found creative ways to grow her business. She has teamed up with interior designers who understand art as more than just a decorative element. "I

being competitive. Each woman in the group represents a different industry, but the dialogue remains relevant to each of them. The group has seen great success within its ranks. Co-founder Liz Levin is an interior designer who has been

Cohen's business experience, art acumen and interpersonal skills allow her to navigate the art world with ease and confidence.

enjoy working with designers who build their work around the art and not the other way around," says Cohen. The building boom has fueled demand for contemporary art and for her services, as well. Cohen has placed art in modern, loft-like condos that have sprung up around the city. One urban loft dweller client even commissioned a work through Cohen.

She also co-founded Industry, a support group for entrepreneurial women who gather regularly to share ideas about issues unique to small-business owners. Cohen says that when she first went out on her own, she realized how difficult it was to find mentors in the business world. "I'd heard about a few women-only networking groups but they seemed too unfocused and too big to be able to connect with or learn from the other members." In contrast, Industry is a small and comfortable forum for smart, motivated women without

featured in the *Daily Candy* and various local publications. Norissa Giangola's eco-friendly yoga wear company, *tranquiliT*, has won major clients cross the country, including luxury spas in New York and California.

Cohen's business experience, art acumen and interpersonal skills allow her to navigate the art world with ease and confidence. By starting an art consultancy, art lovers can leverage her talents to build their own collections. "Art collecting is a way to enrich your life and your surroundings," says Cohen. "Buying art gives you entrée to a world of artists, shows, parties and cultural dialogue that you may not otherwise get to experience. I like introducing my clients to this world."

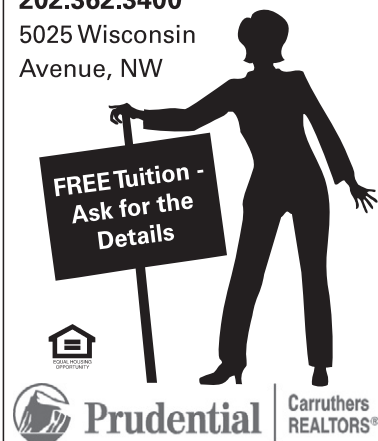
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