

Looking for affordable art? Taking a risk on new graduates can pay off

Investment If you want to own or commission a piece of art, it pays to check out the wealth of talent at degree shows, says **Mark Bridge**

Making a living as an artist is notoriously difficult, and especially so in a time of economic difficulties. Commissioning work from new and recent art and design graduates, therefore, provides a big boost for emerging talent and, from a less altruistic point of view, is a great way to buy one-offs, from a painting to a dress, at bargain prices. There is even the possibility of profit if you spot the next Tracey Emin.

Medeia Cohan-Petrolino, curator at the University of the Arts, London, says: "Commissioning is a hugely under-utilised means of buying art and supporting emerging artists and designers, something most people just don't

consider. It won't normally cost any more to commission a work than to buy something off the wall from the same maker, but you have that personal interaction."

She says that art and design schools' degree shows, which are held later this month and are open to the public, are the best place to meet young artists, view work and get an idea of prices. She adds that many pieces cost hundreds of pounds or less and she advises students to cap prices at about £1,200 at (undergraduate) BA shows and £2,000 at (postgraduate) MA shows.

"People think that you have to be rich. Not at all. For example, you could commission a portrait of a friend by an

artist you like for only a few hundred pounds — much less than you would pay for an established artist, and something the recipient will adore." Meanwhile, she says that smaller pieces, such as silver jewellery, ceramics and screenprints, start in the tens of pounds.

While she considers commissions to offer exceptional value, she says that

the scope for speculative investment gains can be hyped. She says: "There is the possibility that you will discover the next big thing, but to be honest it isn't particularly likely. Most people buy for the love of the artist and the work, not to simply turn an easy profit."

Most art experts agree that people should buy work they like, with investment potential a secondary consideration. Nevertheless, post-graduates of good art schools whose work is exhibited at solo shows in well-known galleries, who win big prizes or

whose work is bought by respected collectors, are perhaps likelier than others to "make it".

Ms Cohan-Petrolino says that commissions work best when the artist and client do not rush into an arrangement, but build up a relationship by chatting over a few weeks so that both parties know what to expect. She adds that this means setting a brief that covers the basics, such as the size, medium and subject of the piece, while

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giving the artist enough freedom to maintain the work's artistic integrity.

John Everett, a retired partner at Deloitte & Touche, has commissioned work from emerging artists and designers for the past ten years. His favourite buys include a painting, a photograph, a textile work, a sculpture and a silver ring that he purchased for his wife. He

says that these works are just as meaningful to him as anything in his wider collection, which features items from some established artists.

He says: "I spend up to the low thousands on commissions from new talent — cheap considering the time and materials. For me, commissioning is more enjoyable than buying finished work. For example, I loved visiting the studio to see an artist working on a sculpture we had discussed."

He recommends the end-of-year shows at the Chelsea College of Art and Design and the Central St Martins College of Art and Design, both in London, as the best starting point for anyone thinking about commissioning for the first time because they feature work from talent in a broad range of mediums.

Among the artists completing master's degrees at Chelsea this summer is Kristian Evju, who has had a number of solo exhibitions and whose work has been purchased by institutional collectors, such as the Central Bank of Norway. The 29-year-old, whose meticulous work focuses on the human figure, welcomes commissions (often of portraits) which he said have helped to fund his studies.

He says: "My prices for a portrait start at about £400 for a small but very detailed pencil drawing and climb to £1,000 to £1,500 for a 50cm by 60cm piece. I have worked for all sorts of people. Despite the general perception, not everyone who commissions art is rich. One couple paid for a piece priced at £1,500 in instalments over a year."

Another artist looking for commissions this summer is Sarah Wiberley, who is finishing an MA in ceramics and glassware at the Royal College of Art. Ms Wiberley's latest works are hand-blown glass vases featuring detailed circus-inspired decoration. These start at about £500 to £750 for a vase with a



30cm base, which, she says “is actually pretty large for the medium”.

The artist, who has nine years’ experience in ceramics, says that her pieces can be used but are most often purchased for display. She adds: “I sometimes work for specific spaces — designing a vase for a certain alcove, for instance. In one recent case the buyers wanted three vases similar to some they saw in an exhibition, but with colour preferences to fit better in their home.”

Besides graduating students who will be exhibiting this month, recent



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graduates from the past few years comprise a much wider pool of affordable talent. These are showcased at events such as Artsmart, a two-day art and design market for alumni of the University of the Arts London (parent university of Chelsea and St Martins) on July 1 and 2, with prices from £10 to £150-plus.

Exhibitors have been picked by an art-world panel including Ben Evans, director of the London Design Festival, and will include The London Chair Collective, a group of graduates who restore and re-upholster old chairs. Pia StJohn, a member who studied at St Martins, says that most of her commissions have been to restore heirloom pieces in traditional styles for about £300-plus. But she adds: “My natural style is much more innovative, so I’m hoping to get some orders that give me freedom.” Her more striking pieces include a 19th-century chair re-upholstered to feature a 3-Dhare’s head.

If you can’t make the degree shows, art and design schools can put the public in touch with recent graduates whose work might be of interest.

Class of 2011 shows

Royal College of Arts

June 24-July 3 (closed July 1),
11am to 8pm
Battersea for Fine Art: painting, photography, printmaking and sculpture
15-25 Howie Street, London SW11
Kensington for Applied Art, architecture and design, fashion and textiles, among other categories.
Kensington Gore, London SW7
www.rca.ac.uk

Central St Martins College of Art and Design

MA Design: Ceramics, Furniture and Jewellery
June 20-23, 12am to 8pm
Southampton Row, London WC1
www.csm.arts.ac.uk

MA Fine Art:
August 31 to September 5
(closed September 4), 11am to 7pm
107-109 Charing Cross Road, London WC2
www.arts.ac.uk

Chelsea College of Art and Design

Postgraduate (including MA Fine Art)
September 2-8, 10am-7pm
weekdays; 10am to 4pm Sat and Sun
16 John Islip Street, London SW1
www.arts.ac.uk



Where to find the next big thing



● The Affordable Art Fair (above) aims to provide “a relaxed, unstuffy environment and lots of good-quality contemporary art with a price ceiling of £4,000”. Many pieces including paintings, sculptures, photographs and prints are available in the low hundreds of pounds. “Names” whose work has appeared at the fair include Billy Childish, an associate of the YBAs who has exhibited at the ICA.
October 20-23, Battersea Evolution Battersea Park, London SW11, October 20-23; adult day tickets from £10, affordableartfair.com

● RCA Secret is an annual exhibition and sale of original postcard-sized art made by professional artists and postgraduate students at the Royal College of Art. Buyers pay a low fixed price per postcard but do not discover the identity of the artist until after purchase. Last year’s run of 2,800 pieces at £45 each included works by Sir Peter Blake and Grayson Perry.
www.rca.ac.uk/secret

● The Frieze Art Fair takes place every October in Regent’s Park, London, and showcases new and established artists represented by 170



contemporary art galleries from around the world. The fair also includes specially commissioned artists’ projects and talks from the likes of Yoko Ono (left) and the German-born artist Wolfgang Tillmans. It has become a leading “event” and is typically attended by celebrity artists such as Tracey Emin and Jake and Dinos Chapman.
Regent’s Park, London, October 13-16, £20, friezeartfair.com.

● Several websites specialise in selling work by emerging artists. These include New Blood Art, which has many striking works priced at under £100.
newbloodart.com



NAOMI GOGGIN FOR THE TIMES



Sarah Wiberley, who is finishing an MA at the Royal College of Art, produces beautiful hand-blown glass vases with circus-inspired decoration

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