

ART BUYERS ARE FALLING IN LOVE WITH FORGOTTEN CREATORS

Collectors are enchanted by the ignored - but is this trend stealing away from younger artists?

Melanie Gerlis, *Financial Times*, 26 February 2025



Maeve Gilmore, 'Child with model bird', c.1950s. Courtesy Alison Jacques & Maeve Gilmore Estate

The next wave of overlooked female surrealists on the market suggests buyers can't get enough of the previously forgotten. While recent years have seen prices shoot up for dreamy works by artists such as Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo — neither in the limelight for decades — forthcoming sales and exhibitions are of even newer names from the 20th century.

Up next at Alison Jacques's London gallery is a show of her latest charge, the British artist Maeve Gilmore (1917-83), followed by another recent signing, Bona de Mandiargues (1926-2000). Both have had a limited market to date and came to Jacques's attention in different ways.

The Italian-born Bona (as she called herself) gave up painting as her marriage ended and went on to make collages that used the cut-up lining of her ex-husband's jackets. One of these works was among those by the many overlooked artists shown at last year's Venice Biennale. Jacques says that she was alerted to Bona by a curator ahead of the Biennale, but says, "I think I would have noticed her anyway", citing a "gut instinct" when looking for artists who merit revival.

ALISON JACQUES

It was more straightforward with Gilmore, who paints scenes of familiar domesticity, including her children, in fantastical colours and settings. Gilmore was the wife of the writer and artist Mervyn Peake and worked tirelessly to ensure his legacy after he died in 1968, Jacques says. At the same time, “her best work came into play, out of the shadow of another artist, who happened to be her husband”. Jacques compares the dynamic to that of Dorothea Tanning, “known for so long as the wife of Max Ernst but who went on to have a career spanning decades after he died [in 1976]” (Tanning died aged 101 in 2012).



Bona de Mandiargues, La Sacra Famiglia, 1997. Courtesy Alison Jacques

Often, Jacques says, the reasons for such artists being overlooked are societal: “It’s the classic story. There were a lot of really great women artists who were not considered because they were women.” As the Venice Biennale revealed, the overlooked also often comprise artists who weren’t western or white.

The accepted geography of an art movement also plays a part, alongside an artist’s gender or race. Surrealism is associated mostly with Belgium, France and Mexico, so practitioners from other regions are only gradually emerging. Christie’s has a painting by the Italian-American Enrico Donati, an artist endorsed by André Breton, the godfather of surrealism, but only latterly making his mark

on the market as an overlooked male artist. His “Roi d’éclair” (1945), a burst of colour that creates a mystical monster, comes to auction next month, estimated between £80,000 and £120,000.

“There’s a whole branch of American surrealism still undiscovered,” says the New York dealer Emmanuel Di Donna. He highlights too the English chapter, noting Ithell Colquhoun (1906-1988), currently having a major moment at Tate, as well as Bridget Bate Tichenor (1917-90), a former model and Vogue editor who moved to Mexico and became a compelling, magical realist painter.



Bona de Mandiarges, *La Mia Mano*, 1992. Courtesy Alison Jacques

Di Donna accepts that “not everything is worth rediscovering. Some artists didn’t make it because they weren’t great.” He says though that artists who have died have a distinct advantage over their living peers. “Collectors can see a whole body of work, you can see the progression. A contemporary artist could do something cool, fun and expensive now, but you have no idea what they could do in 20 years’ time.” He cites the School of Paris painter Maurice Utrillo who, after some success, “would sit on a beach in the south of France and paint Montmartre in the snow, because that was the work that sold”.

Jacques agrees that having the whole story makes a difference. “It means you can see if artists really were pioneers” — with the added benefit of a story about coming out of obscurity.

It’s a dynamic playing out in today’s more risk-averse market in which younger artists, who have turned heads and emptied the wallets of the wealthy for the past decade, are falling out of favour. The so-called “wet paint” market, of works sold at auction within three years of being made, peaked in 2021, making a total \$215mn. This fell to \$30mn for the first half of 2024, according to the latest report from ArtTactic and Artscapy. These speculative sales (in expectation of quick returns) can “cause a temporary disequilibrium between economic and cultural value”, the report says — in other words, people have been left with overhyped art in their hands so are understandably changing tack.

Pricing is steadier within the rediscovery zone, where works for private sale start in five figures and can gradually get to six. There are occasional leaps, notably in the in-vogue surrealism strand, which helps keep collectors excited. In 2020, Remedios Varo’s 1956 “Armonía (Autorretrato Sugerente)”, a haunting self-portrait of a solitary creative in her study that likely chimed with the Covid-19 lockdown spirit, sold through Sotheby’s for \$6.2mn having been bought for \$350,000 in 1988.

There are concerns, though, that the unforgotten are taking much-needed attention and opportunity away from younger makers. The Venice Biennale, conceived as a showcase of contemporary trends, fielded 181 deceased artists out of a total 331 in 2024. But, experts say, the relationship has settled at about the right level. “I was initially concerned that the judicious foregrounding of artists who had been unfairly ignored by the art establishment would mean that younger artists might not get due attention. This was in the context of dwindling funding to those galleries that provide the space for more emerging artists,” says Ben Luke, art critic and podcast host for The Art Newspaper. Now, he says, “I am pleased to say that my concerns were unfounded. I think the balance is the best it has been in my lifetime, even if the support structure remains somewhat precarious.”

Jacques notes the enduring influence of 20th-century artists on today’s crop and it is hard to miss the surreal bent of many contemporary artists. Fundamentally, Jacques says, making discoveries in each area isn’t so different. “What percentage of all these really great and overlooked voices at, say, the Venice Biennale will be seen as critically important? Not that many. It was a [curatorial] concept. And within it there will be a few artists that prove part of our history.”