

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Pandemic pushes digital acceleration at Saatchi Art gallery

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Seeing the direction. Painting by Jim Tipler. Image courtesy of Saatchi Art

By DIANNA DILWORTH

Saatchi Art, the world's largest online art gallery, is seeing a jump in Internet sales, with many buyers spending much more time at home and investing in objects that beautify their abode which now doubles as a workspace.

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Historically, luxury buyers have preferred the in-store experience, which is a behavior reflected similarly in the art and auctions world. However, in the second quarter Saatchi Art's mobile transactions grew 100 percent year-over-year, signifying a more open-minded market that is interested in reinvigorating the spaces they inhabit.

"This has been an incredibly challenging time for many brick-and-mortar galleries," said Rebecca Wilson, chief curator at the Saatchi Art, London. "Fortunately, with a long history as an ecommerce company, we at Saatchi Art are comfortable and confident in serving our customers and artists in the new digital reality that COVID-19 has presented.

"Our primary mission at Saatchi Art has always been to democratize the art world, and in doing so support emerging artists and bring joy to more people through art," she said. "If anything, the coronavirus pandemic has made inclusive, accessible art buying experiences like the one we offer even more essential."



Rebecca Wilson is chief curator at the Saatchi Art. Image courtesy of Saatchi Art

Online art fairs

Since March, Saatchi Art's Web site has seen a significant increase in sales, which is likely caused by two things: bricks-and-mortar galleries, fairs, and festivals have been cancelled, and affluent consumers are looking to beautify their homes during this challenging year.

"With many buyers spending much more time at home, there has certainly been an increased demand for art and the ways it can bring joy to one's personal space," Ms. Wilson said. "We've been excited to welcome new collectors to the Saatchi Art community, and to buying art online more generally.

"We did have to postpone the spring editions of our global art fair, 'The Other Art Fair,' but our digital team at Saatchi Art was able to bring the event to life online immediately and to great success," she said.

Saatchi Art's The Other Art Fair turned digital this year and generated more than \$1 million from April to July after launching its Online Studios virtual fair experience.

Online Studios features exclusive digital programming, such as live artist workshops, virtual art tours and in-studio artist profiles, along with live streamed social media content. The event launched a guest artist program, showcasing artworks by Rolling Stones legend Ronnie Wood and actor-comedian Noel Fielding.

Artists took to the new platform with more than 90 percent of artists who had been scheduled to show in-person at a spring fair participating in the new digital experience.

"The move to a full focus on our digital experience has enabled us to generate great content and collections, and to spend more time reaching our audiences where they are at a time when everyone could use the inspiration that art provides," Ms. Wilson said.



Silver Lining Painting by Cat Tesla. Image courtesy of Saatchi Art

Mobile growth

Since spring 2019, Saatchi Art has seen a significant shift in its customer behavior, with mobile Web users outpacing desktop . It has since been focused on investing in and optimizing the mobile art browsing and buying experience.

"While art is an emotional purchase, it can involve a relatively long consideration period, and so it's important to stay top of mind with our visitors while they are browsing, and continue to deliver to them valuable content and expertise from our team of curators during that process," Ms. Wilson said.

"Last year, we launched SMS marketing," she said. "We are optimistic that this channel could be a valuable addition to our marketing mix not only because it can supplement email marketing efforts, but because we know that increasingly consumers have a greater desire for 1:1 personalized messaging, especially on mobile."

The online gallery found that 70 percent of art buyers are hesitant to purchase because they cannot see the artwork in advance. So last month, it launched an augmented reality "View in a Room" feature for customers on mobile Web.

The new feature allows art buyers to select artworks and view them on their own walls at home through their phone or tablet.

"By offering the ability to view an artwork via augmented reality on mobile, buyers will instantly see the beauty of the artwork in their home and will feel confident in their purchase," Ms. Wilson said.

Saatchi's push into digital is only going to accelerate.

For instance, it plans to introduce additional online programming this fall, including a "Spotlight City" series that highlights emerging artists in up-and-coming, trending art communities. Detroit, Kansas City and Seattle will be among some of the first markets to be launched.

"The Online Studios has given us really valuable insights into the future of art fairs and the importance of integrating technology and digital tools," Ms. Wilson said.

"As we look to our future fairs, we'll be presenting some exciting new initiatives, such as virtual reality art installations while expanding on the early successes of our Online Studios," she said.

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