

The New York Times

Stirring Up the Art World Again

By NANCY HASS



THE sleek crowd grew restive at the opening late last month at Mary Boone's Fifth Avenue gallery, but Ms. Boone was nowhere in sight. Guests, some clad in downtown Dolce & Gabbana and others in uptown Armani, languidly surveyed the large paintings by Will Cotton, hyperrealistic pseudo-landscapes of sugary confections -- ice cream glaciers, lakes of fudge and Popsicles that loomed like poplars.

At exactly 6 p.m., Ms. Boone emerged from her office. She was dressed expressly to complement one of the paintings --a Valentine-themed work full of swirly frosting and candy hearts printed with messages like "Hug Me" -- in a rose-print Todd Oldham frock and red python stilettos.

It was easy to see in the outfit a vote of confidence for Mr. Cotton, the latest in a wave of young painters Ms. Boone is once again championing. And it was a vote, too, for Ms. Boone herself, for whom life has started to seem oh-so-sweet again.

The flamboyant dealer once known as the Queen of SoHo, who moved uptown in the mid-1990's after the scene she helped ignite had flamed out, is working hard to reinvent herself. And her timing couldn't be better. The art world is once again heading into overdrive, propelled by new Nasdaq money, the bustling Chelsea gallery scene and a young generation of mediagenic artists with accessible work.

This is just the brew of ingredients Ms. Boone thrived on in the 80's, when she reinvented the art game, turning painters into stars by getting them into mainstream magazines, trumpeting their sales and directing them to the right parties at the right clubs.

Ms. Boone, 48, has tried to distance herself from some of the more crass practices of that era, especially after the art market took a hard fall in the recession of the early 90's -- a wipeout some blame on her personally.

She believes she is due for another moment in the sun. "For the first time in years, I feel like there are artists out there who really speak to me," she said. "It really makes you feel alive."

After a decade of representing primarily mid-career painters, she has picked up two young, semi-notorious artists, Damian Loeb, 29, and Tom Sachs, 33, as well as Mr. Cotton, 34, Peter Wegner, 36, and Inka Essenhigh, 30, a painter who has been featured in both New York magazine and Vanity Fair.

Mr. Loeb, who has also posed for Vanity Fair (shirtless), sometimes seems as well known for party hopping as for his paintings, which have been snatched up by collectors like the designer Nicole Miller and Michael Lynne, the president of New Line Pictures. Last week, Mr. Loeb was in London, staying with Elton John.

Ms. Boone has managed to find herself at the center of highly public events reminiscent of her earlier heyday, when she once built a pyramid of 400 Champagne glasses for a SoHo opening. Maybe she couldn't, as the saying goes, get arrested in the 90's. But that is precisely what happened last September, when she was held in jail overnight for displaying a vase of live 9-millimeter cartridges as part of a show by Mr. Sachs. The charges were dropped, but not before a flurry of publicity.

Then, a few weeks ago, Russell Haswell, a young painter whom Ms. Boone doesn't represent but who is part of Mr. Cotton's and Mr. Loeb's circle, cut his throat and threw himself out the second-floor loft window of Cecily Brown, a painter with whom he was romantically involved, critically injuring himself. It was Ms. Boone who was quoted in The Daily News, saying that everyone had been supportive of Ms. Brown, another of the young new art stars, and that the incident was "nobody's business."

"She is where she should be, at the center of the action," Ross Bleckner said of Ms. Boone, who has represented him since the late 70's. "That's what she really loves."

Ms. Boone says she has changed a lot since the grim days of the early 90's, when an Eric Fischl painting she had sold for \$1.4 million at the height of the market in the 80's was resold for \$167,500.

Many gallery owners and critics at the time accused her of having overhyped the neo-Expressionist artists in her stable, like Julian Schnabel, David Salle and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Ms. Boone, after being celebrated in the prior decade for bringing a new professionalism to the gallery business, was demonized for peddling art like underwater Florida real estate. Her worst offense, detractors said,

was pushing artists to release inferior works to fill the torrid demand of the era. She was the first dealer to use a waiting list that required collectors to buy works that had not yet been produced.

Today, Ms. Boone says the lean times taught her valuable lessons, even though there must have been plenty of personal pain, which she downplays. Mr. Salle left her for an archrival, Larry Gagosian, in 1991; George Baselitz took off for Pace soon after.

In 1995, Brice Marden decamped for Matthew Marks. Ms. Boone held on to Barbara Kruger, Mr. Fischl and Mr. Bleckner (and signed up Leonardo Drew and Richard Artschwager), but there was talk that she would go bankrupt. She said she stayed afloat by selling off paintings she had bought from her own artists early in their careers. Even with prices slashed by the recession, she made money, she said. "Contrary to people's perceptions, I've always been very conservative," she explained. In 1996, she moved to her current lush spot, one of the most expensive gallery spaces in the area, on Fifth Avenue and 57th Street.

She made the move precisely when the most adventurous gallery owners were pioneering in Chelsea. Now, Ms. Boone has decided to open a new, second gallery of her own there in September, adjacent to the new Gagosian Gallery space on West 24th Street.

She has traded in her signature Maud Frizon heels from the 80's for up-to-date Manolo Blahniks, and says she has found a new footing with the current generation of painters. Unlike many of the mid-90's artists, they do not castigate Ms. Boone for her role in the last decade's great art panic. Fashion-conscious children of the cyberera, they have come of age when the 80's are being revisited fondly by fashion designers and musicians. The neo-Expressionists aren't bogeymen to them, and the act of painting is free of the "bourgeois" reputation it acquired with multimedia and politically strident artists in the 90's.

The newest crop of artists wasn't old enough to have witnessed either the intoxication of the 80's or the hangover of the early 90's. Instead, what is fresh in its memory is that in 1998 one of Mr. Basquiat's paintings sold at auction for more than \$3 million.

"I don't come to all this with baggage and resentment," Mr. Loeb said, adding that he chose Ms. Boone because she "blindly" believed in him. "My work isn't a reaction to what happened 20 years ago."

Mr. Sachs said he chose to show with Ms. Boone precisely because of her association with the 80's. His highly ironic work, the best known of which uses designer logos on low-rent objects to send up fashion -- he once made a McDonald's Happy Meal out of Hermes shopping bags -- seems to sit well in Ms. Boone's location. "I love being across from Bergdorf Goodman and next to the Warner Brothers store," he said. "Besides, Mary herself is a brand name. There's a great performative quality to that."

Ms. Boone's talent for making young artists feel like the center of the universe appeals to them. "She doesn't yet have that many young artists, so she really gives you a huge amount of attention," Ms. Essenhigh said. "She has this great way of making you feel there's no better party than the one she's going to throw."

Ms. Boone, whose mastery of publicity set her apart from the more modest dealers she idolized while growing up, like Leo Castelli, said she has learned to keep a somewhat lower profile. She declined to be photographed for this article, dodging behind her artists as a photographer clicked away at the Will Cotton show. "I just want the focus to be on the artists," she said.

She stays at home more these days, caring for her 12-year-old son from her marriage to the art dealer Michael Werner, from whom she is divorced.

Still, she continues to favor the body-hugging designer outfits that helped get her noticed by the media in the first place. In the 80's, "I was the girl in front of the car, selling," Ms. Boone said, adding, "I guess I'm still that girl."

For an interview on a recent afternoon, she wore a ruched gray Azzedine Alaia number. Seated behind a pristine glass table empty of paperwork, she sipped mineral water delicately from a crystal glass. Two assistants sat right nearby, the only objects before them a date book and three colored markers: blue, green, red.

Barely five feet tall, Ms. Boone has always presented a powerful package. She is bold, persistent, passionate, with a temper that still flares. Behind her back, her assistants sometimes call her Scary Spice. Asked in a follow-up telephone interview about conjecture that Mr. Sachs, in the wake of the controversy over his last show, might leave Ms. Boone, she denied it. She immediately directed an assistant to call the artist at his studio, and patched him in on a conference call. But she did not inform him that a reporter was listening. "Are you unhappy with how the show went?" she asked.

Mr. Sachs, who seemed rather taken aback, assured her that he had not been unhappy. He suggested that rumors of a defection might have started in the weeks around the show because of "a few screaming fights" between the two of them. "I could have said something in anger to someone that I didn't mean," Mr. Sachs said.

He asked when she was opening the Chelsea gallery, and said he had been planning to pay her a visit that day. "Is there a bad time for you?" he asked.

"For you, there is never a bad time," Ms. Boone responded gaily.

To Ms. Boone's detractors, she is merely up to old tricks, championing overrated artists who are more photogenic than talented. More than one dealer lighted into Ms. Boone with surprising vehemence in private but refused to be quoted condemning her. They fretted that a comeback by her would be an early indicator of another market collapse.

Many dealers say the influx of money from Wall Street and Silicon Alley worries them, despite how much they are profiting from it. The high prices that many young artists are now commanding is entirely too reminiscent of the 80's, said Barbara Gladstone, whose Chelsea gallery came to prominence in the 90's. "I think most good gallerists are trying to be really responsible right now. We are waiting for the other shoe to drop."

The resurgence of (and fuss over) painting and the increasingly glamorous personas adopted by the new generation of artists, like Mr. Loeb, Mr. Sachs, Ms. Brown, Lisa Yuskavage and others, also concerns some dealers. Andrea Rosen, who is often held up as the brainiest and most serious of the young dealers, said that some of the current crop of painters effect a pose without having anything to say. "They have absolutely no idea of what it means to be a contemporary artist," she said. "They are in it for all the wrong reasons."

Like Ms. Rosen, many dealers now bristle when artists court public attention. They prefer the reclusive approach of the 90's stars like Matthew Barney, Robert Gober and Bruce Nauman, who cultivate apathy over whether their work sells and are notoriously publicity-shy. "The artists in the 90's were not lifestyle people," said Ms. Gladstone, who represents Mr. Barney.

The same cannot be said of the artists to whom Ms. Boone is attracted. Mr. Loeb, especially, has come under fire. Few new artists have been so critically disparaged in recent years. His work -- realistically rendered scenes that are pastiches of other artists' photographs, sometimes violent and sexually explicit -- has been called derivative and prurient. In reviewing his latest show in January, Michael Kimmelman of The New York Times wrote, "Mr. Loeb is just playing a role: every circus needs a clown."

Nonetheless, the show sold out at prices around \$30,000.

Even Mr. Sachs, who is taken more seriously by critics, is hardly the sort to hole up in his studio with the phone off. He is a regular in glossy magazines and, despite his work's lampooning of brand-consciousness, a favorite of the fashion set. A guillotine he built and slapped with a Chanel brand was bought by the socialite and haute-couture customer Dodie Rosekrans.

Ms. Boone has lost none of her taste for the rough and tumble that lie just beneath the chic surface of the art world. The latest speculation swirling around her -- which she would not confirm or deny -- is that David Salle, unhappy at Mr. Gagosian's gallery, will return to her. Unlike Mr. Schnabel, who left Ms. Boone in 1985 for Pace and whose recent paintings have not been well received, Mr. Salle's newest work is considered strong. Were he to leave the notoriously tough-dealing Mr. Gagosian, it would be considered a coup for Ms. Boone. (Mr. Gagosian did not return calls for comment. When Mr. Salle was asked if he was moving to Mary Boone, he said, "That is not the case.")

Many dealers say that Ms. Boone is dreaming, but in what seems either an act of remarkable confidence or wishful thinking, she still lists Mr. Salle among the artists she officially represents. "David has always been an important part of my history," she said last week. "I think he is a pivotal artist and he stands for what I always strived for, to endure."