

The Young and the Youngs

HOW A LONDON GALLERY PROMOTES A DIALOGUE BETWEEN HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY ART



Josyane and Robert Young, London dealers in European folk art, can often be relied upon to punctuate their traditional material of naïve paintings, love tokens, marriage chests, and trade signs with something unexpected. A few years ago, the entrance to their booth at the Winter Show was framed by two hand-carved limestone figures of a raffish man and woman, each almost five feet tall and weighing nearly three hundred pounds, made who knows why in the mid-nineteenth century. I didn't have to ask what prompted the Youngs to bring this gigantic couple across the water. I knew it simply represented one more

adventure in their exploration of the glorious material culture of the past.

More recently, the couple has broadened their explorations by opening their gallery to contemporary artists, including students at the prestigious Royal College of Art, who submit a project to be featured in the window of Robert Young Antiques. Holding three such exhibitions each year is meant to cross-pollinate the qualities of the antiques in their gallery with the work of emerging contemporary artists, something that prompted me to ask Robert Young a few questions about this intersection of past and present.

Opening night party for Rosie Reed's sculptural installation *The Grandmothers*, a Robert Young Antiques "Contemporary Collaboration," June 2019. All photographs courtesy of Robert Young Antiques, London.

I understand that “Contemporary Collaborations” is not primarily a commercial venture. What was the reason?

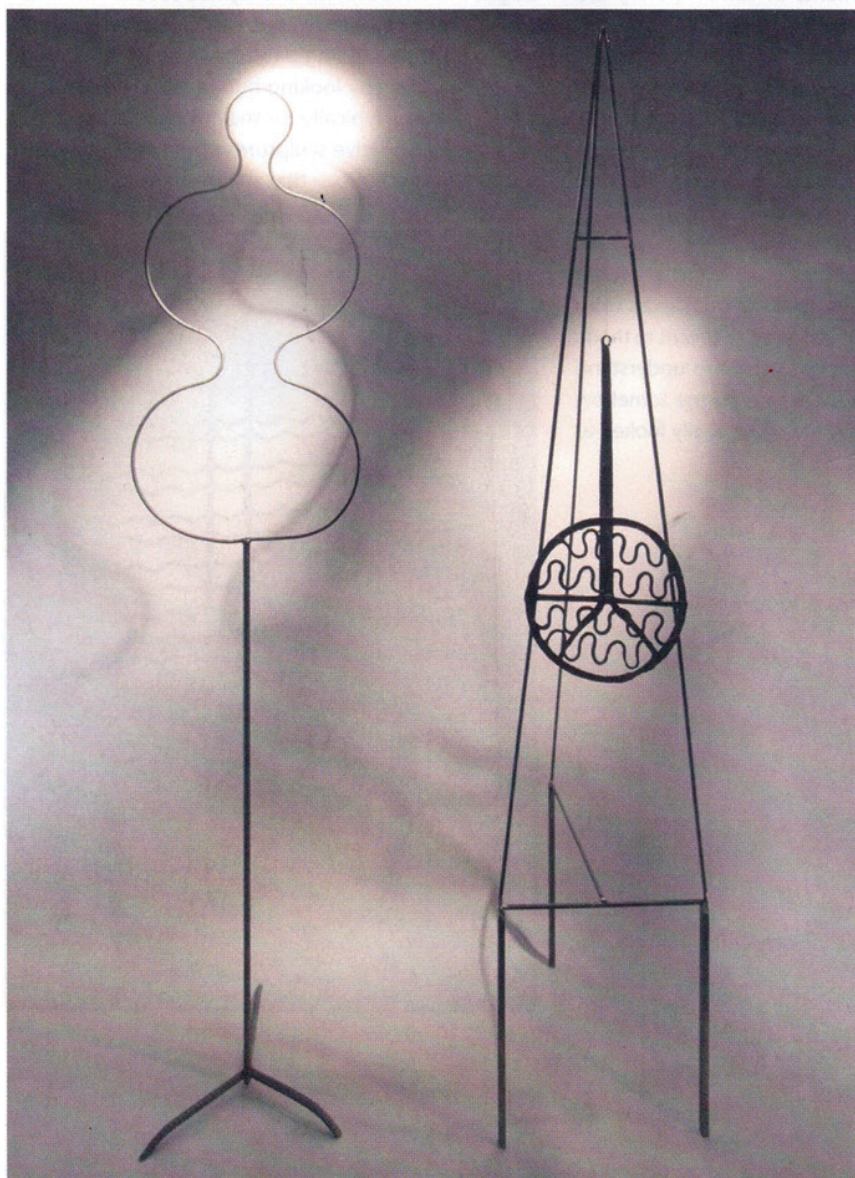
You’re right, it is not. We pay the artists a subsidy to exhibit and we do all the promotion, printing, and professional photography. However, we have benefited from sponsorship by local brewers and distillers for the opening-night private-view parties to help support the initiative and the artists. It’s great for the local community.

In addition, the artists *are* permitted to price the works if they choose to, and, if sold, we take a 20 percent commission. In the case of Amba Sayal-Bennett’s work that you are featuring, we did actually sell her pieces.



Artist Amba Sayal-Bennett at the opening night for her exhibition *An Unusual Arrangement*, January 2019.

A pair of sculptures from Sayal-Bennett’s *An Unusual Arrangement* in wrought and welded ferrous metal, one of which incorporates a long-handled antique circular griddle from the holdings of Robert Young Antiques.



The reason we don’t stress the commercial side of this program is that we don’t want to muddy the waters. This is not Robert Young Antiques morphing into a contemporary art dealership (as many firms who originally built their galleries and reputations handling antique and historic art have done and are doing). We just want to break down the stigma that old things are now somehow artistically or aesthetically obsolete.

We have been fortunate that the works we handle at RYA have largely been blessed by the contemporary style police, probably because they have a curious compatibility with contemporary and modern works and spaces.

But personally I have always disliked the segregation of old and new, both in museums and commercial galleries. We know that artists have historically been inspired by the works of previous generations and centuries, so it seemed sensible to get young contemporary artists in to look at our collections in a different way and see what elements they found interesting, relevant, exciting, or inspiring. I wanted them to re-contextualize “antiques” and look at old things in a fresh way, simply as combinations of form, colors, textures, and so forth, the elements that make up all art.



Josyane and Robert Young in their London gallery.

Primitive standing horse in carved and painted birchwood, Swedish, c. 1740.

Wine rack in wrought iron, French, c. 1900.

How do you choose among the applicants?

We have employed Erin Hughes as our Contemporary Collaborations curator. Erin is an artist, a master's graduate of the RCA, and passionately involved in the contemporary art world. However, she also has a foot in our camp because when studying at RCA she started to work with us to help pay her fees and other costs. She has a genuine sensitivity to the works we handle and a grasp of the developments in contemporary art. All applications are addressed to her, some she solicits, others come completely out of the blue. She selects a shortlist of typically between three and five proposals, which we then go through together and agree on which artist to select.

The artists have to submit images and a written proposal, including details about which pieces from our collection are most interesting or relevant to them. I don't judge the works or even claim to understand some of them. I just like them to grab me somehow and to get the feeling that they have really looked at

things in our collection and found something worthwhile and inspiring. It's a gut thing.

In this country there can be an indifference bordering on contempt for the arts of the past, especially among young people. Do you find that to be true in the community of the artists you have featured?

Honestly, no—really, really not. However, the artists we have worked with have often said that the process has changed their attitude toward old things. I guess the ones who have been keen to apply already have some kind of sensitivity to historic material, and of course the RCA master's degree students are by definition educated, and artistically aware, so maybe not a good random selection of artists. But before we began this initiative, we already had several students a week coming in to explore our collection—some, sketching, others taking photos, some just mooching around and quietly looking but genuinely engaging with the works. Typically it is the more abstract pieces such as the primitive sculptures of the stylized horse and bird-form snuffbox that attract them.

