

ART & DESIGN

Scene stealers

Turning the LA art scene on its ear, controversial collector Stefan Simchowitz takes time out from his 'transparent trade' to highlight the city's ascendant stars.

By ANNEMARIE KIELY Photographed by STEFAN SIMCHOWITZ





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Reveling in year-round sunlight, ubiquitous celebrity and the production means to make mythology real, the Los Angeles art scene has evolved from a mid-20th-century dust bowl into America's new locus of contemporary excellence. New York might argue that point, but in the last 10 years, the city's centreless sprawl and frontier freedoms have fielded a rich diversity of capital, community and creator that is pushing markets and makings beyond LA's Downtown nucleus.

Within this rapidly expanding environment, a new species of cultural entrepreneur is spawning with alarmingly adaptive speed. He's bypassing the art establishment and brokering deals with the best young talent, controlling its currency and consumption while cornering its markets. He is typically brash, boasts an A-list Hollywood clientele, brags more publicity than Tinseltown's constituents and can elicit bile from the best-behaved gallerists.

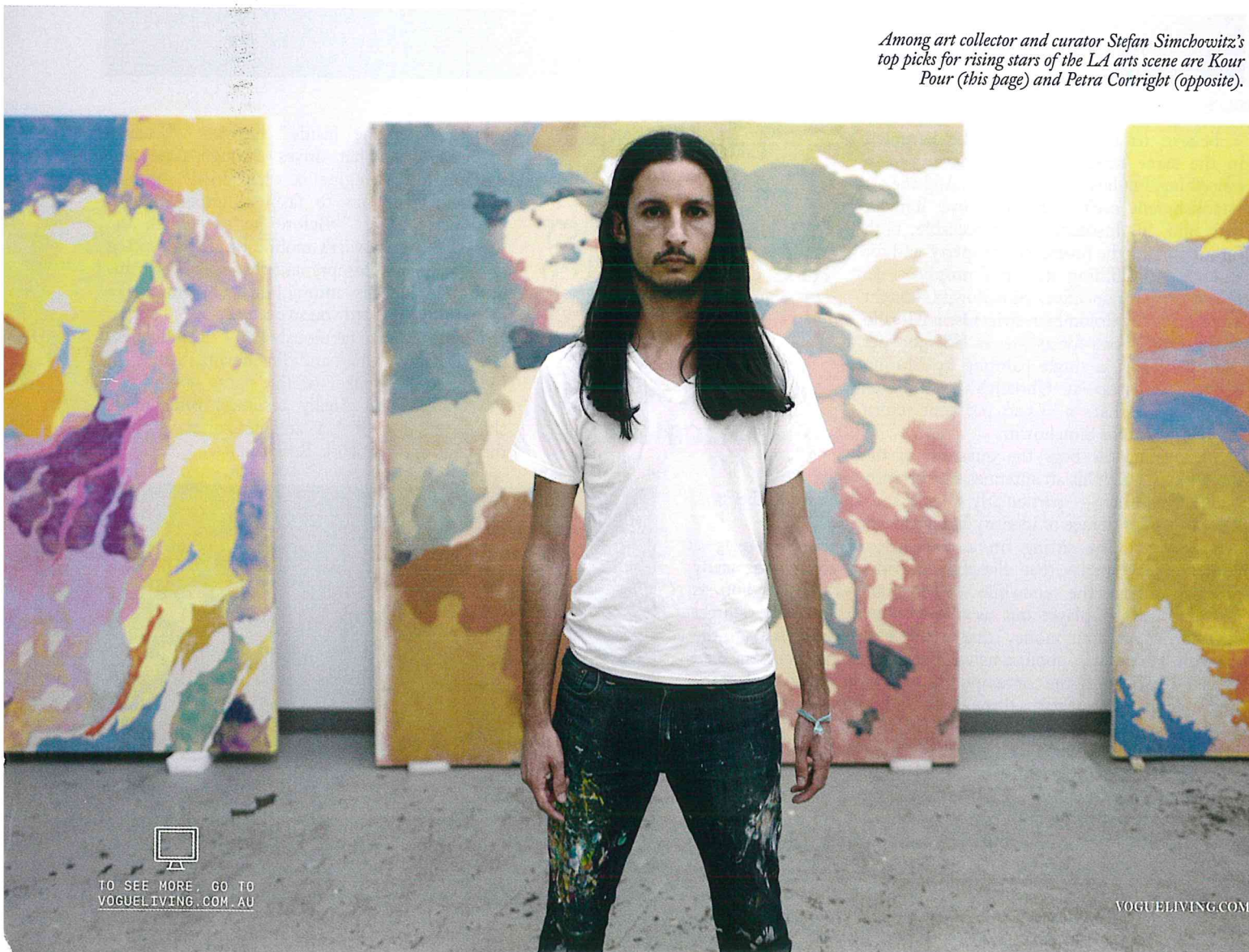
He is Stefan Simchowitz, the South African-born, Stanford-educated collector, curator and arts counsellor who consistently calls out the art world for being closed. For his outspoken ways, the US press has pegged him the "patron Satan of contemporary art". But is it fair characterisation of a cultural entrepreneur who serially lets slip that the art emperor is wearing no clothes? How does he describe himself?

Speaking by phone while driving through LA, Simchowitz first addresses the notion that life should be fair. "There just is and there isn't," he says with a strained stoicism that likely seeded during his South African school days when, reputedly bullied, he determined to "never let people fuck with me" again.

"I think labels are a point of departure and are very important to have," he continues. "They are the first step in the journey that involves discourse and criticality. So I'm strangely quite grateful for them and people who take the time to elicit their opinion. But I don't like to describe myself; I like to leave that to others."

Contrarily, however, Simchowitz then snapshots himself as an energetic supporter and investor in cultural production whose mission is to help artists. This 'help', euphemised by his detractors as a Faustian pact with the devil, often manifests as the provision of a studio, the payment of home rent and the purchase of materials in exchange for the bulk acquisition of art (at a healthy discount), for which Simchowitz then generates a market. He typically buys the "overlooked" artists' work for less than \$10,000 and either sits on it, onells it to a high-net-worth collector base whose ownership of it instantly inflates its currency, or flips it. It's a paradigm shift you could liken to Facebook's impact on communication and advertising (all middle agencies removed). Simchowitz doesn't »

Among art collector and curator Stefan Simchowitz's top picks for rising stars of the LA arts scene are Kour Pour (this page) and Petra Cortright (opposite).



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Simchowicz also champions the work of (from top) Joey Wolf and Lazaros.

« believe that the art world can be disrupted in the same sense that Facebook can own everything, but he's having a crack. And the art establishment can't stand it. Love him or hate him, his instincts are impeccable, both for identifying the future 'hot property' and for strategically fulfilling its (his) prophecy. To put it into perspective, Simchowicz bought 34 paintings by Colombian artist Oscar Murillo in the early 2000s for as low as US\$1500 per canvas. In 2015, a single painting by Murillo fetched £242,500 at Christie's in London. Theoretically, that's a 21,500 per cent return on investment for Simchowicz.

Such astuteness begs the question of the direction in which his art antennas are currently twitching. "Africa — particularly Ghana and Zimbabwe," he says. "Not for issues of race or identity but for its energy."

Reported to be sitting on a collection of more than 1500 contemporary works that Simchowicz values at approximately US\$30 million, the erstwhile dealer frames himself not as an opportunistic player but as a patron who seeks to redirect "the hurricanes of big money" that serially blow young artists to the margins. He despairs about a new collector class that is disengaged from the discourse of the contemporaneous — a group hooked on the high-velocity chase of status through "the old echoes of art greatness".

Spouting philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach's thinking that illusion is sacred and truth is profane, Simchowicz says he is simply building new structure, cutting through "the crap" to encourage an open conversation about culture. It is a vehicle designed to crash through corporate states that harbour outrageously expensive art for a select few. "I don't much care about the shape of that vehicle, I care

"Labels are a point of departure... they are the first step in the journey that involves discourse and criticality"

about the engine inside," he says. "Because the engine is what drives through time and space and the engine is what drives through culture, impervious to fashion, impervious to incorrect labels..." Before he can finish the sentence, Simchowicz's mobile rings, prompting the garrulous entrepreneur to park both his metaphor and his automobile. "I've gotta take this, will get back to you in 30."

The fast drop is fabulously LA — a land where 'the sell' is its own art and Simchowicz its devilish Duchamp-like shaker of the status quo. When the conversation finally resumes, Simchowicz shares his list of LA art luminaries and his thoughts on their work. Read on... »





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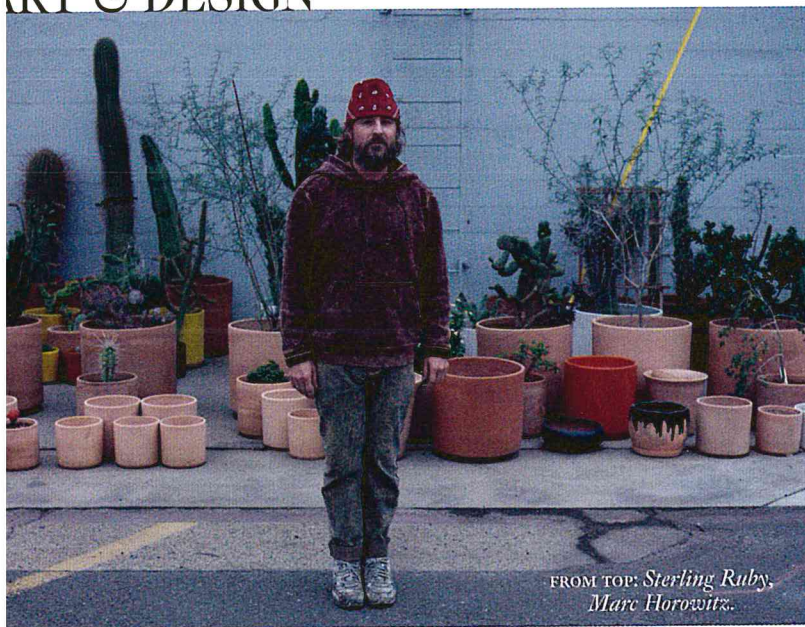
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FROM TOP: Sterling Ruby, Marc Horowitz.

Petra Cortright She's a radical breakthrough artist who's essentially using the media of digital to make abstract paintings. I don't think her work is so much about identity and gender, as many say it is. If there is anything about her that is feminist-agenda driven, it's the fact that she competes head-on with the class of male artist working in the same area. She kicks the arse of every male artist in her grouping, without apology and without using the crutch of gender or identity politics. She is underestimated, and she is going to be the first female artist in the world to lead a 'meta' movement — like the Andy Warhol of Pop or the Donald Judd of Minimalism. She is it! petracortright.com

Marc Horowitz Marc is Petra Cortright's husband, and I met him through her. I wasn't familiar with his work, but as I got to know him, I discovered this crazy world of moving through Hollywood as a comedian and performance artist — like his stint as a production assistant on a [US home furnishing giant] Crate&Barrel catalogue. He wrote his name, a dinner invitation and a contact phone number on a whiteboard [affixed to an armoire on one of the pages] and it went to print. They unwittingly sent out 12 million copies of these things. He was fired from his job, but his phone started ringing off the hook. He travelled across the country having breakfast, lunch and dinner with all these people who got his details from the catalogue. He spent 15 years doing these crazy things, and then he started working on paper and I said, "I think there is something there; I want to work with you". Cut to three years later: he's had shows all over the world and major collectors collect his work. I call him the Will Ferrell of the art world. He's just launched his website; you click on a painting and call a 1-800 number to hear him talk about his work. 1833marcive.com

Kour Pour Now US-based, this British-Iranian artist is dealing with the trajectory of culture, trade and commoditisation as it flows through the Eastern and Western landscape and art traditions. He is a hotchpotch of races and geographies. He asks why the postwar structure of art is so rigid and non-inclusive of the past, and he is doing it through the objects of trade for profit — the Iranian rug, the Japanese woodblock print — using extremely traditional techniques of practice in a contemporary atmosphere. He questions the efficacy, legitimacy and hierarchy of art tradition and its totality in defining what contemporary art is. I think he is a giant artist. kourpour.com

Joey Wolf When I met Joey Wolf, he was sleeping in his car, sharing a studio and making these like-themed paintings — a bunch of guys drinking beer on the lawn at night, a bunch of guys going to a pool party in Palm Springs and staying at the cheapest motel, a bunch of guys peeing on the side of the road. It was a series of banal, basic images about the bland experiences of many American youth but painted with an extraordinary precision and understanding of light, shadow, reflection, orientation. He builds the surface of the painting up into a thick impasto — sometimes it protrudes an inch. The paintings are so time-consuming that for the last three years, he's been nonstop in the studio. I try not to sell the paintings because I want to build a huge body of work so that when he exhibits, they show the full range of his scale. I think he is going to be one of the most promising painters of his generation. @joeywolf

Sterling Ruby Sterling Ruby comes out of the structure of art school, where the godfathers were Donald Judd — Minimalism, an almost militarylike formalism — and Mike Kelley, who explores themes of conquest, dream landscapes, films and figuration. Ruby is trying to escape the shackles of confinement of Donald Judd while respecting his aesthetic laws and conditions and bridging them with the ideas of Mike Kelley. He's trapped between these two polarities while wrestling with the history of postwar art. So his work is in conflict with formalism, rigidity and the straight line, in relationship to abstraction, the animus and the inner spiritual chaos of mankind. He is a giant artist, thematically difficult to understand, simple but complex, and he has a unified aesthetic language across a broad spectrum of output. I think he is simply the most important artist to come out of California since Ed Ruscha and John Baldessari.

gagosian.com/artists/sterling-ruby

Lazaros Lazaros is a young artist who practices witchcraft. He is gnostic, esoteric, mystic. He makes spells for people, and his body is covered in tattoos. I chased him because I bought this weird wood sculpture that I found in a small gallery. I went to another gallery and bought this weird glass jar filled with objects suspended in oil. I randomly happened to buy these wildly different objects by the same artist, so I investigated further. He makes these spell jars. You go to him and say, "I need more love and clarity in my life", and he makes the sculptural object and then makes the spell, so they become magic potions. I hope they work! *VL*

