

INFLUENTIAL PHOTOGRAPHY DEALER STEVEN KASHER WILL SHUTTER HIS GALLERY TO JOIN DAVID ZWIRNER

Kasher will become a director tasked with 'cross-pollinating' his expertise and photo-based clientele with Zwirner's enterprise.

By Tim Schneider, November 20, 2018



In what looks to many like another sign of the times in the gallery sector, storied New York photography dealer Steven Kasher will close his namesake gallery at the end of this year to join David Zwirner as a director. Kasher announced the news via email this morning.

Although Kasher's note emphasized that he would work to "source the best vintage photography—not to mention painting and sculpture—from the secondary market" for Zwirner's collector base, he clarified in a phone conversation with artnet News that his new role will be much more expansive and collaborative. He likened the new union to a "cross-pollination," in which he can introduce his photo-based collectors to Zwirner's robust stable of artists (including icons like Donald Judd and Dan Flavin with no direct photographic practice), and his colleagues' clients can further engage with photography and media through his own expertise and connections.

"There are some divisions of labor [at Zwirner], but they are definitely not media-specific, for one thing, and they're not even really space-specific," Kasher explained. "My knowledge of photography will be used by the whole team, and I'll also be relating to all the different artists that David Zwirner represents for my clients. It goes both ways."

STEVEN KASHER GALLERY

A New Home

Kasher says that he will be based on the second floor of Zwirner's 69th Street project space, where he will also be "interacting daily" with the artists and collectors who appear there. (His current sales director, Cassandra Johnson, will make the move with him.) His responsibilities will include collaborating on the exhibitions presented at the Upper East Side site, regardless of whether or not they center on photo-based work. He mentioned that, while he spent part of today exchanging ideas with James Welling (who will open an exhibition at the space in January), he will be just as involved in the Chris Ofili show that will follow it.

Aside from representing artist-writers Teju Cole and Bob Colacello, as well as feminist pioneer Joan Lyons, Kasher has been an influential dealer in works by some of photography's most celebrated names, including Irving Penn, Robert Frank, and Diane Arbus, since he began working as a private dealer in 1995.

This extensive experience will serve him well at Zwirner. Along with contemporary photographic heavyweights such as Wolfgang Tillmans, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, and William Eggleston, Zwirner recently announced representation of the Roy DeCarava estate and co-representation (with Fraenkel Gallery) of the Diane Arbus estate.

But with a rigorous background in other media, including studying under celebrated art historian Meyer Schapiro, Kasher is looking forward to engaging with much more than his new employer's lens-based artists. "I started as a painter and sculptor," he says. "In a way, it's coming back to my roots."

The Long and Winding Road

Over the years, Steven Kasher Gallery developed a reputation as a leader in documentary photography, as well as a champion of the work of African American artists and nontraditional practices. For example, gallery artist Ming Smith owns the distinction of being the first African American female photographer to be collected by the Museum of Modern Art, and photographer Stephen Shames, also represented by the gallery, earned acclaim with his pioneering work documenting the Black Panther Party beginning in the late 1960s. (Shames, who is white, established a close friendship with founding member Bobby Seale early in the group's life.)

While Kasher was quick to note that he was hardly alone in this endeavor, he confirmed that he had been working very consciously for the past 25 years on broadening the art world's conception of which images and image-makers are collected under the rubric of photography. Instead of isolating his efforts on images made by self-defined fine-art photographers, he "really pushed hard," he says, to spotlight photo-based works originating "more from the margins than from the center of the art world," including works emerging from photojournalism, fashion, science, and more.

Kasher has foregrounded this perspective beyond the gallery walls, too. Apart from his work as a dealer and curator, Kasher is also a prolific scholar. He is the author of many essays and multiple books, including *The Civil Rights Movement: A Photographic History, 1954–68*, *America and the Tintype*, and *Max's Kansas City: Art, Glamour, and Rock and Roll*. Not surprisingly, each of these makes the argument for a more open-minded view of photographic media.

"An image that lives and breathes, that makes us see and feel and understand an important social movement—is that art?" asks Kasher. When he began dealing, he says, these other categories "were not collected, were not part of art museums. Now every museum has this kind of work."

Challenges and Opportunities

But collecting tastes aren't all that has changed in the photography market during his quarter-century as a dealer. Kasher notes that prices have skyrocketed, email and the internet have eased the burdens of presenting work to remote clients, and art fairs have ratcheted up exhibitors' costs and pressures. "It takes more wherewithal to play in this game [today] whether you're a dealer or a collector," he says. Even technology's efficiencies have a distinct downside: "As things get easier and more people do them, there is more competition."

All of which contributed to Kasher's decision to make the leap to the mega-gallery. He says the prospect of joining Zwirner arose during discussions about projects the two galleries were collaborating on, and that he explored the possibility for over a year before deciding to make the move.

"It's very hard running a small gallery like mine," says Kasher. By joining Zwirner, "I can take away some of those risks and some of that hard effort that doesn't always get rewarded and have a different set of problems [instead]."

But it wasn't just the difficulties that spurred Kasher to start this new chapter. The choice also stemmed from somewhat of a sense that he had accomplished his mission. In the email announcement, he highlighted the pride he felt over the fact that "the majority of our sales in recent years have been directly to major museums, a testimony to the importance of the artists we have been showing." He also noted that he has been "active" in finding new representation for the artists on his gallery's roster in the months leading up to today's announcement.

By phone, Kasher added a bit more life perspective to his emailed sentiments. "I'm at a point in my life where my ego isn't very strong. I don't need my name on the door, on all the reviews of all the [projects] I'll be working on. I feel very comfortable giving that up," he says. "I've really enjoyed making a difference in New York... and getting a lot of kudos for that over the years. But it's not necessarily something I need anymore."

Kasher is not the first dealer to close up shop and take a job at the growing mega-gallery. Christopher D'Amelio closed his own Chelsea gallery to join Zwirner, where he is now a senior partner, in 2013. And cutting-edge Shanghai dealer Leo Xu shuttered his eponymous space last fall to lead Zwirner's operation in Hong Kong.