

Megan Piper: A Rising Star in London's Art World

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Jason Holmes met gallery director **Megan Piper** at *The Piper Gallery* in Fitzrovia to find out what lies behind the profusion of galleries in this area of London

'What's going on in London is very exciting,' Megan tells me. 'In Fitzrovia alone there are well over 50 galleries that were previously not on the map. People like myself are opening up their first London spaces. There's a positivity around here. There are established galleries alongside newbies, and everyone feeds into this buzz. On a monthly basis new galleries are flocking here and I think this is a sign of the times.'

Megan Piper, 28, is an Islington girl, born and bred, and has been a gallerist since June 2012. 'I had a pop-up exhibition in May of last year which was the first exhibition I put on,' she tells me. 'It was a huge installation piece at a church hall in east London, and that was my first show, having left my job in January 2011, when I had been working for Momart, the fine art handler. I worked for them co-ordinating the logistical side of exhibitions. I was gallery services co-ordinator. I used to look after White Cube and the Serpentine Gallery.'

Megan, with fingers resting on the stem of her flute of prosecco, casts her gaze around the hanging art. 'What I'm doing now is as fun as it gets. For me, the excitement is working with artists who are still producing exciting and dynamic work. I only work with artists whose careers have spanned 40 years or more. They have to have demonstrated sustained practice and a consistently high quality of work.'

But surely the crowded art market is crowded enough? 'I don't think so. Sustained practice means a long-term commitment to a body of work. All the artists I work with are aged between their very late fifties and 84. I don't represent artists who have picked up a paint brush at 60, because the point of interest for me is in an artist who has worked his or her whole lifetime, without the necessity of exhibition,' she says. 'The artists I represent have a large body of work and so it is important to be able to show how their work has evolved, that there are different periods of their careers and the work isn't static. This is what interests me.'

Megan's gallery looks at rediscovering and re-evaluating older generation artists and presenting them to a new audience. Martin McGinn, Paul de Monchaux, Francis West, Wendy Taylor, Tess Jaray, Vaughan Grylls, Neil

Stokoe, Desmond Rayner and Edward Allington are the nine artists she represents. 'At the moment, I'm hosting nine shows a year. The current exhibition is an ambitious group show of 14 artists, only two of whom are part of the gallery's stable.'

The current exhibition looks at abstract paintings from the 1970s and the diversity therein, an era when painting had fallen out of favour as conceptual art had reared its head. 'It's a commercial gallery so the revenue is generated through the sale of artwork. The gallery is still young and is where we hoped it would be at this point in time. My business partner, Andrew Morris, and I spent five months building it,' she says. 'I've always wanted to open a gallery and launch a concept that makes a big statement about artistic practice.'

'My stable of artists is replete at the moment. I do receive a large number of submissions every day. I've three artists who I am showing next year who are not part of the gallery's stable, and so I'm conscious of taking on more artists than I can actually look after.'

How hands-on is she? 'I pay my artists regular studio visits. There is a limited amount of time to hand, so if you make a commitment to an artist to represent them, you have to honour it. There's only myself and my assistant Charlotte, so you have to be mindful of how many more [artists] you take on.'

What does she think of Brit Art? 'I'm an optimist. There are a lot of exciting things going on, although artists' values can be inflated to an extreme, fashionable point where big names cream off all the headlines. It can overshadow a huge amount of exciting things.'

'I'm regularly coming across artists I haven't heard of before who haven't exhibited for perhaps 30 years. New names, faces and work are constantly surfacing.' And her plans for next year? 'Things will get bigger and better. It's about continuing to promote the artists that I've got and establishing artists who aren't on people's radars. I want to develop my programme.'

'I'm confident now that if I see work, I know if I like it or not. My own tastes dictate the selection of artists, and my taste is eclectic. I respond emotionally to works of art, and I know in my heart whether or not I like them. This is a commercial gallery so I have to believe in what I'm selling. Maintaining the gallery's integrity is about sticking with artists that I like. My name is above the door and that is part of the brand, and I mustn't lose sight of that.'

Is she conscious of being a brand? 'I am. I'm a gallerist now, but I didn't have an established reputation within the art world until I opened the gallery's doors. Branding, therefore, becomes important in this regard.' And where does she see herself in 25 years' time? Megan runs her hand through her hair and thinks. 'I'd like to have established a well-respected gallery that had an exhibition programme that people admired,' she says. 'And really, I would like to think that the gallery could cross water... and expand, to Paris or New York.'

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