



# DOUBLE ACT

BISCHOFF/WEISS

Ten years ago, a pair of art enthusiasts ventured into London's Contemporary art world by scouting artists and staging shows out of sheer passion. **David Gleeson** meets Raphaëlle Bischoff and Paola Weiss – the duo behind one of the British capital's dynamic galleries.



Sometimes, it is very nice to be proven wrong. Hurrying through London's Mayfair, one of the most affluent residential and commercial districts in Europe, to meet Raphaëlle Bischoff and Paola Weiss, I expect to meet two powerful galleristas. Bischoff/Weiss is situated just off Berkeley Square and is a typical white cube – quite small, sleek and pristine – and I pass time before the interview looking at a striking exhibition of paintings by Louise Thomas.

I am pleasantly surprised to meet two enthusiastic and articulate, as well as completely unpretentious dealers. Indeed, their road to running a gallery in London has been quite a cosmopolitan one. Bischoff is from Paris, where she grew up and studied both law and art history at the Sorbonne. Weiss was born in Geneva to German/Spanish parents and studied business administration in Washington DC. Both arrived in London thanks to their husbands: Bischoff married an Englishman and Weiss's Egyptian/Syrian husband grew up in London and it was in the British capital where the two women met in 2002.

## ORGANIC APPROACHES

Despite being well-qualified, both had not had any previous work experience when they arrived in London and found it difficult to find suitable jobs. This gave each time to indulge their love of art and with little art world experience but much passion, they got involved in putting on shows. It was whilst they were feeling their way around the edges of London's art world, working on small exhibitions, that they first began working together. "London in 2002 was such an exciting place to be art-wise; the East End was so vibrant and Frieze was gearing up to start the following year," recalls Weiss. "We ran into each other organising shows on the fringes of the art world, attending satellite art fairs, etc – we never made a con-

This page:  
Raphaëlle Bischoff  
and Paola Weiss.  
Photography by  
Prudence Cumming.

Facing page:  
Exterior view of  
Bischoff/Weiss in  
London. Photography  
by Prudence Cumming.

## GALLERY

This page:  
Louise Thomas. *Hadrosaur Cove*. 2013. Oil and acrylic on canvas. 150 x 200 cm.  
Photography by  
Plastiques Photography.

Facing page:  
Installation view of works by  
Rana Begum. Left wall: *No 328 – Fold*. 2012. Paint on mild steel. 99 x 152 x 46 cm;  
Right wall, clockwise from bottom left: *No 335 – Fold*. 2012. Paint on mirror-finish stainless steel. 73 x 55 x 20 cm; *No 345 – Fold*. 2012. Paint on mirror-finish brass. 56 x 54 x 16 cm;  
*No 322 – Fold*. 2012. Paint on powder-coated mild steel. 74 x 50 x 19 cm; *No 307 – Fold*. 2012. Paint on mirror-finish stainless steel. 55 x 67 x 14 cm.  
Photography by Todd White.

scious decision to be gallerists. Our career path was a little more organic and unpredictable." Bischoff jumps in – it's a mark of their closeness that all conversation flows easily as they finish each others' thoughts – "We started a business partnership and ran a temporary project space, were showing work by friends and their friends, were encouraged to find a more permanent space and now, 10 years later, here we are!" Their first project spaces staged very bold shows, with new artists making the most of a platform for their work. Nathaniel Rackowe's huge kinetic work *68 Doors* took over the entire gallery, with visitors walking through the work to enter and Maya Hewitt had an entire wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling painting installation. From the beginning, the duo actively searched for new artists in London's art schools, such as the Royal College of Art, the Slade and Goldsmiths College. Consequently, they attracted collectors who were searching for emerging artistic talent in London's East End, and at about this time, they began inviting curators to stage exhibitions. Weiss recalls meeting Rackowe on a visit to another artist's

studio: "We loved his work immediately and presented his pieces in a fair in Miami before we had our gallery. It was a huge success and we met all the right collectors. We knew Rana Begum then but decided to work with her about three years later." They opened their first 'permanent' gallery on Rivington Street in 2005 after some of the artists they showed complained about not having a 'proper' space. Here, the duo presented exhibitions by, amongst others, Begum and Rackowe, whilst searching for more artists.

The gallery's *modus operandi* has changed little since they began and both confirm that they are still working with most of the artists they started with, still aiming to make bold shows and inviting guest curators. The space is now in exclusive Mayfair, largely a result of their lease ending and the 2008 recession. "Young gallerists of our generation had seen a big boom and then it stopped – it was difficult for them to have to move to smaller premises or close," explains Weiss. "We were lucky – we were still too small to be affected and were able to weather the storm. When White Cube opened Mason's





Yard, moving back into Mayfair, it signalled a shift in London's commercial art world."

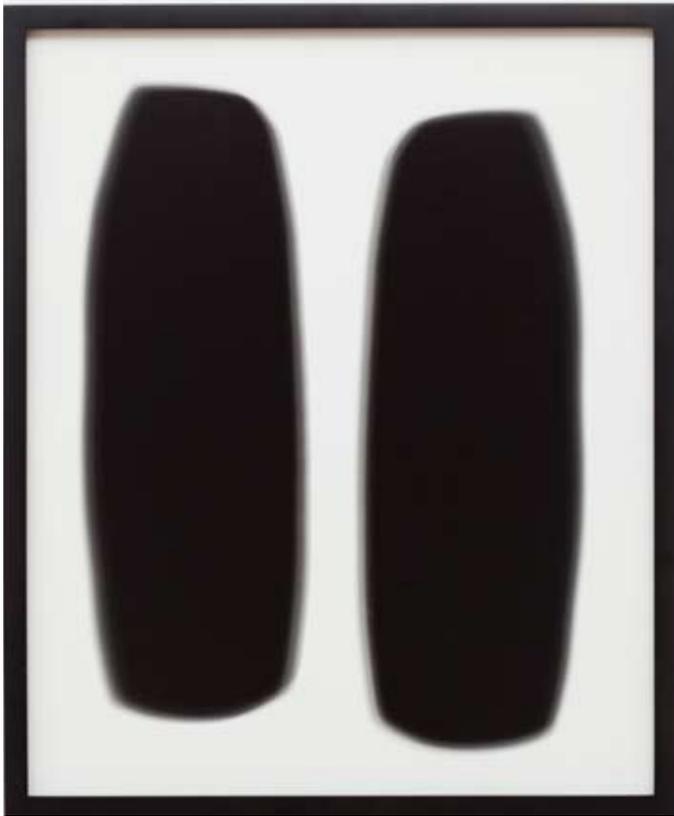
The recession, says Bischoff, meant that, "international buyers and collectors were spending less time in London and therefore made less effort to get out to the East End." The focus had shifted back to the West End and the pair decided to look for a new space there – a humorous hunt with Mayfair dealers who were thoroughly amused by the ambitious duo's limited budget and particular space specs. "One of them laughed at us and said 'tell me when you find it!'" giggles Weiss. With luck and sheer determination, they finally located a space in an area surrounded by other galleries, close to major hotels and big auction houses.

## RULES OF THUMB

When asked to define their appeal, it takes no time at all for them to respond eagerly: "We're like a very small Flowers Gallery, only here in Mayfair," says Bischoff, invoking the celebrated space that was founded in 1970 and now situated in Shoreditch. From the very beginning, Bischoff/Weiss has imposed a price range that is

generally lower than similar spaces and the duo is keen on being a platform for emerging talent. However, they acknowledge now looking for more mid-career artists and the only thing they must agree on is that they both like the work and the artist, admitting that, no matter how great the work, not having a good relationship with its maker will make everything difficult. This rule of thumb has seen them thrive and continue to attract collectors, whom they note are quite different now to those they dealt with a decade ago. These international collectors reflect both Bischoff/Weiss's presence at worldwide art fairs as well as their central London location. In addition, work by the gallery's artists can be found in public collections across Europe, the USA and Australia. Ask about any artist in the Bischoff/Weiss roster and the duo bubble with enthusiasm and touchingly, an almost parental pride. Their website currently lists eight artists and every year they invest in a monograph and have so far published these on Hewitt, Raphaël Zarka, Rackowe and Begum. They chatter away about individual artists: Weiss pledges Zarka's popularity in France and asserts greater recognition for the French-born artist in London after a solo

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show at Modern Art Oxford in 2009; Bischoff discusses how Begum has gone from being largely unknown to doing international public commissions in the space of just a few years, as well as having her work acquired by public collections in India, Tasmania, West Virginia and the UK. “And Aya Haidar has worked with refugees in Syria and Palestine and has been going to refugee camps since she was 18 – it is hard not to be affected by the humanity and compassion in her work,” says Bischoff. Their programme continues to actively promote artists who are generally termed ‘upcoming’, with reassuring long-term results like placements in international galleries, institutional shows and important collections.

On the subject of Middle Eastern art, their infectious enthusiasm becomes noticeably palpable. Both declare that they have never intentionally sought out regional artists to represent, but have developed a broad awareness of what is available and the wealth of Contemporary Middle Eastern art is one reason they enjoy Dubai so much. “We are very keen to show more, but of course we have to find the right work and there is so much excellent Middle Eastern art around,” adds Weiss. “I’m interested in doing a show of women artists from the region, but we’re still looking for something that feels right for us.” Both acknowledge a difficulty with showing Middle Eastern art in London concerning people’s expectations, with collectors often keen, but only on work that they think will yield good investment opportunities and viewers often wanting certain ‘obvious’ narratives, which Saatchi’s 2009 show *Unveiled: New Art From The Middle East* confirmed, as did the V&A’s 2012 *Light from the Middle East*. “People often look no further than what they first see, forgetting that art can also be about its own practices and processes and that it can satisfyingly provide more than the initial ‘hit,’” adds Weiss. They are both dismissive of any work that plays up to stereotypical regional narratives, asserting the importance of the integrity of the work rather than its place of origin and citing Iranian Sheree Hovsepian, who lives and works in New York, and whose work cannot be easily regionally categorised as it explores the process of making art itself.



## LOOKING EAST

Aside from its roster, which includes artists from the region, the gallery has, in recent years, strengthened its relationship with the Middle East through its participation at Art Dubai, a fair that the duo praises. “Of all the major art fairs we attend – FIAC, Frieze, Nada, Art Brussels – we really do prefer Dubai as it always looks so different and fresh in comparison to others,” adds Bischoff, who views the fair as a great place of artist and collector ‘discovery’. “We’ve met American collectors who are so impressed with Dubai’s new galleries and countries that aren’t represented at the other fairs.” Collectors who frequent Art Dubai, believes Weiss, are risk-takers – more so than those in Europe. “They will do their homework and invest in new artists,” she adds.

Bischoff/Weiss is a small operation that has worked steadily and carefully to become a respected gallery that punches above its weight in terms of exposing and developing its artists. The pair recognise the value of international exposure whilst carefully monitoring the general health of their London base. Their future plans are simple: to steadily enlarge their artist roster and grow their collector base while presenting striking shows within modest production budgets. They would also like to produce more monographs, maintain their presence at the best art fairs and continue their Mayfair base. All very simple, straightforward and hopefully, achievable. 

This page:  
Aya Haidar. *Seamstress V*. 2011.  
Embroidery on printed linen.  
32.5 x 42.5 cm. Photography by  
Prudence Cuming.

Facing page:  
Above: Sheree Hovsepian. *Untitled  
#59* from the *Haptic Wonders*  
series. 2012. Unique gelatin silver  
print (photogram).  
61 x 51 cm. Photography by  
Plastiques Photography;  
Below: Nathaniel Rackowe. *GP06*.  
2013. Oak, glass, acrylic paint,  
fluorescent tubing and concrete  
blocks. 200 x 70 x 45 cm.

All images courtesy  
Bischoff/Weiss, London.

For more information visit [www.bischoffweiss.com](http://www.bischoffweiss.com)