

FAMILY VALUES

David Totah helps collectors find the
“visceral necessity to live surrounded with artworks.”

David Totah, who emerged from finance to follow his lifelong passion under the tutelage of a family of art dealers and collectors, founded TOTAH, a modern and contemporary art collaborative space in Manhattan’s Lower East Side returning to Dallas Art Fair in 2019.

Jill Magnuson (JM): *David, I know you grew up surrounded by artists and family in the art business, but that was not your original path. What prompted the moment you decided to open your own gallery and why the US?*

David Totah (DT): Opening the gallery was the natural evolution in a path I embarked on when I was 19 years old while studying at the Wharton School at Penn. Even though I was set to work in finance, the sudden death of my uncle Edward (who ran the gallery in London then) prompted my decision to actively take part in the art world, not as a profession but a significant source of interest and stimulation. I started educating myself with devotion, reading a lot, visiting galleries, museums, and attending auctions in New York for over 20 years. Looking back at those early years, it feels as if I was unconsciously laying the ground for what appears so clearly today to be my real vocation. I grew up in Europe, but ever since my college years in Philadelphia I had no doubt about wanting to build my life in the US. I founded my first business in finance at 29 in New York. A few years down the line I decided to shift my activities towards what truly ignited my enthusiasm. I started showing a mix of established and emerging artists in our offices; it was straight line from that point on. Opening the gallery was a way for me to open up to the world and share my vision and my artistic sensibilities.

JM: *I almost hesitate to describe your space as a gallery; it appears you*

are addressing it more as a cultural hub, a nexus for artistic revelation and connections. How do you translate that experience for those who might not walk through your physical space?

DT: You’re right, my intention from the beginning was to open a space which would transcend limitations of the traditional definition of a gallery. I wanted a place where like-minded people would converge; I am a strong believer in the power of alchemy when it comes to art and creativity. Our shows and various projects are a way for us to broadcast a subtle message. With our artists, books, website, press releases, videos, and social media we aspire to trigger the curiosity of those who haven’t walked through our space yet. It’s not easy to translate that experience, making abstraction of its physicality. We aim to share that experience with the community that has been forming around our activities; art is meant to be felt, and the context is crucial. The way our space is built including the projection and special projects room downstairs feels intimate and warm. Our intention is to create a point of encounter that exudes a very defined identity meant to inspire and welcome an audience who yearns for an energy that feels familiar and nurturing.

JM: *You have spoken often of intuition and how that instinct has helped shape your program today. How do you inspire collectors to trust their feelings while exploring new realms, perhaps with works and artists quite unfamiliar to them?*

DT: The only path I can think of to inspire others is to express and share enthusiastically what truly inspires me. I am a passionate collector and voracious for art with which I feel a deep and often unexplainable connection. I love to help collectors in finding that

Above left to right: David Totah with David Austen, *Animal at Night*, 2010, oil on flax canvas, 66 x 60 in.; Aleksandar Duravcevic, *Fragments*, 2017, graphite on clay paper, 30 x 40 in.

same visceral necessity to live surrounded with artworks, which end up acting as guardians of their identity at home. True collectors are hunters and I like to respect that dynamic. In other words, my job is to present our artists while working to expand our audience and then let things happen organically. Once the initial contact takes place and a collector is interested in a work, I enjoy telling the story behind it and who the artist is. Taking the time and exploring a collector's sensibilities is a very important part of the process for me. Ultimately, one of the most rewarding aspects of what I do is seeing the collector walk out thrilled by his newly discovered bounty. During our first show, I discovered how much I love creating books on our artists and how essential it is to help collectors understand and familiarize themselves with the oeuvre of the artist and his or her universe.

JM: *Contemporary art is often bold and not always popular with all, but can speak truths and ideals that transcend the art form. Do you find that challenging or compelling within the art market and its audiences today?*

DT: One must always question if those spoken truths are triggered by genuine motives by the artist and how they relate to his or her own life, whether or not the impact of the work and the work itself will stand the test of time and continue to be relevant once the context and trend has passed. Great artists are often messengers, and art should make us feel or think for ourselves; it should be a slow, individualistic process. We are living in the era of obvious and instant gratification, and through pervasive medias the general audience is constantly given what it wants: the sensational. It sells. To me, the truth is most often found in what a smaller minority needs: more authenticity – a word overused, yet poorly applied in today's giant art-marketing machine.

JM: *Last year was your first year at the Dallas Art Fair. What surprised you most about the experience?*

DT: Yes, Dallas was our first fair [ever]; it was an intuitive decision, which ended up being extremely rewarding. Taking part in the fair was a way for us to export our aesthetics into unfamiliar territory; we liked that challenge. I knew Dallas counted a sophisticated collector base and I love Texans, they are warm and enthusiastic. Brandon [Kennedy] has done a great job infusing his impressive artistic sensibilities, running it in a very personable way, creating an intimate environment, which is quite rare for a fair. **P**

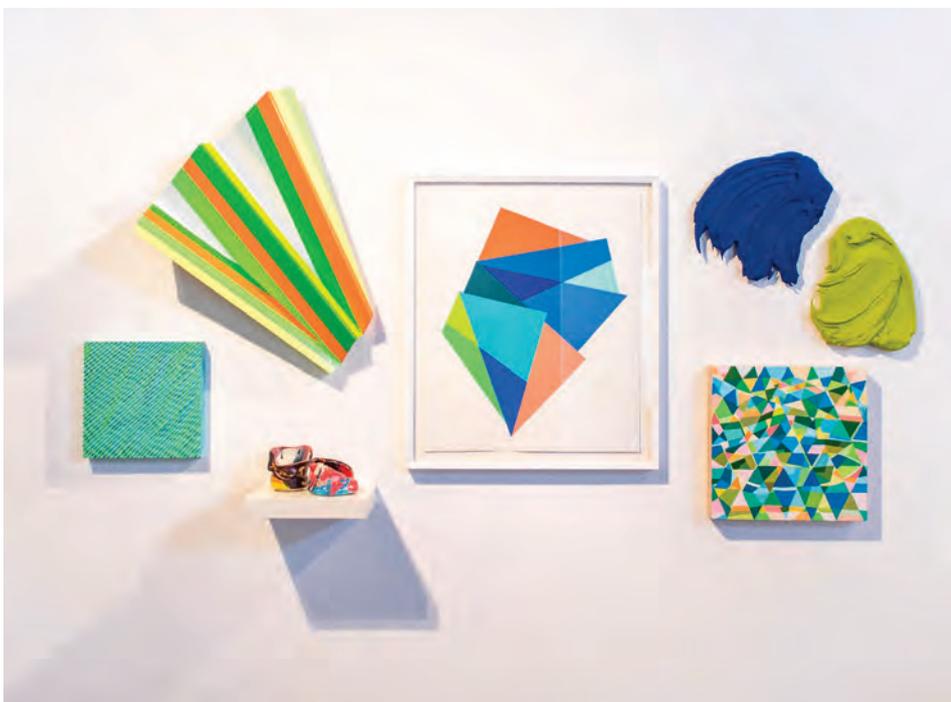
INTERVIEW BY JILL MAGNUSON



Luca Pancrazzi, *Sparkling forest 1*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 60 in.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER:

Jill Magnuson is the Director of External Affairs of the Nasher Sculpture Center, home to one of the most renowned collections of modern and contemporary art in the world. Prior to the Nasher, she oversaw communications and events for the building and opening of the AT&T Performing Arts Center and ran a communications agency dedicated to civic and cultural clients. She is also a huge fan of TOTAH and looks forward to his return to Dallas.



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