

DEALER'S NOTEBOOK

David Totah

As New York's Lower East Side continues to court gallerists and collectors, Totah—who opened his eponymous space on Stanton Street in 2016—spoke with *Art+Auction's* Sara Roffino about the inspiration behind his initiative and listening to intuition while navigating the market. An exhibition of works by two Los Angeles artists—Brian Wills and Helen Pashgian—is on view at Totah through early June.

FIRST ENCOUNTERS

As a kid I spent a lot of time alone, looking for ways to entertain myself. When I was about 4 years old, I used to play with marbles and there was this Lucio Fontana painting in the living room—it's a canvas with stones attached to it, one of his *Pietre* works, which are quite rare. I grabbed one of the stones out of the canvas to add it to my collection of marbles. That painting is now in a museum. I recall the painting so vividly. It was red and I can still see the stones. I think the one I grabbed was yellow.

THE ESSENTIALS

AGE: 40

HAILS FROM: Milan, Italy
SPECIALTY: Totah brings together emerging and established artists in an ambitious and experimental program on New York's Lower East Side.

CHILDHOOD IN MILAN

Back in the '60s, my father, who was a real estate developer and financier, started collecting and then dealing in art. My uncle, who was much younger than my dad, was a hippy and a free spirit—an artist at heart. He was living in London. My dad always had a passion for art; he suggested that my uncle open a gallery in London. That was the late '70s. I partially grew up in Milan, but we went to London a lot. And there were always artists at home.

GETTING STARTED

I was 19 and in college in Philadelphia when my uncle died. His sudden death made me realize that art is what I love, but I didn't want to do it professionally. Partly because I was studying business at Wharton; partly because I wanted to find my own way; and partly because I felt like if art became a source of revenue, I thought maybe it would become like homework and I wouldn't enjoy it as much. But I decided I was going to build my



The exterior of Totah, on Stanton Street, on Manhattan's Lower East Side.

BOTH PAGES: FROM LEFT: GILLES BENSIMON; THREE IMAGES: JOHN BERENS

knowledge on my own terms and I started going to every show and auction. I would drive into New York for the evening auctions and then drive back, both seasons. I couldn't buy art because I didn't have any money, so I bought books. And then when I was working in finance, art was my antidote; it was a way to feed my soul and my creativity. As soon as I had a bit of money I started collecting, and then as my friends started to look at art, they would ask me what I thought before they bought anything and I would say yes or no. I started my own business at 29, which was investing for high-net worth families and institutions in hedge funds, but about seven years down the line I didn't find passion in it anymore. Suddenly I decided that I was gradually going to transition my activities into art. I started hanging works in our offices—mixing historical pieces with younger artists, which was the beginning.

INAUGURAL OUTING

For the first show at Totah I brought together Alighiero Boetti and Mel Bochner. There is of course an artistic reason for this, but there was also a personal aspect to it. Boetti represented my childhood because he was often in our home, and Bochner and I have become friends over the

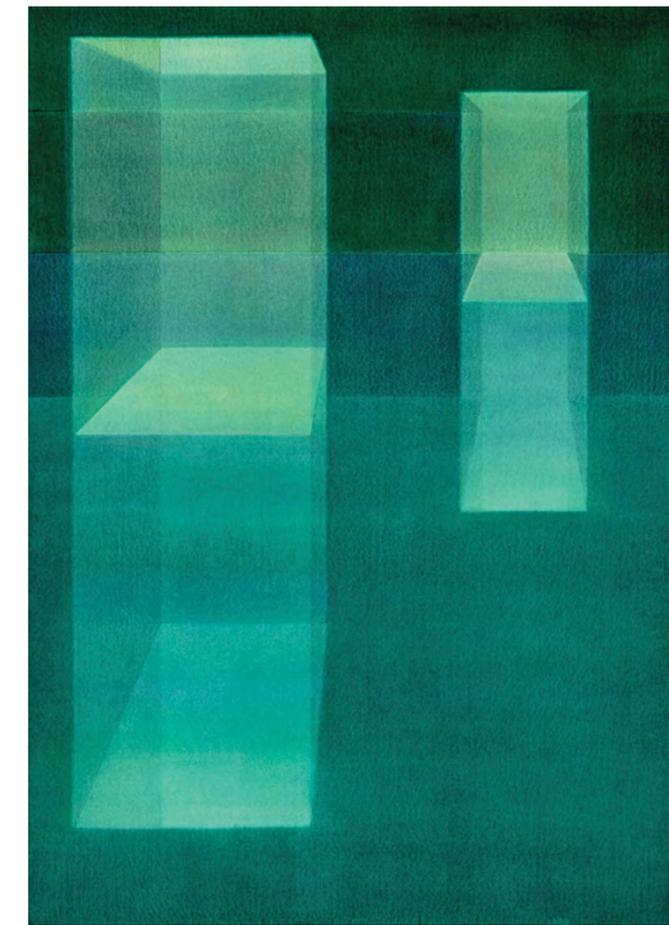
past few years here in New York. I told him he was my American Boetti and he laughed. Since connections are also what I am interested in exploring through my various projects, it made sense to start with this.

WORKING FROM INTUITION

As soon as you start doubting your instinct the mind starts meddling with your intuition. Art, for me, comes only from intuition—from something that I feel. I don't think it. You can doubt business practices or deals or strategies, but in terms of deciding if I feel something about a painting or an artist, it's something instinctive. For me art is a way to feel less lonely, and more connected to others. It's a recognition of someone's soul through the art they make.

ON THE MARKET

When we did the Laurretta Vinciarelli show and had to decide how to price the work, I said to her widower, "She was an academic, you're an academic, and I think both of you would like the work to be accessible to people who are inspired by her." These aren't necessarily people who have so much money, so I priced them at an accessible level. A lot of people thought I was crazy. Some said I could have priced them at two and half times more and still sell them, but that didn't feel right. We sold the whole show in two weeks. I have certain ideals and operate from a certain place, but I also have another side, which is very conscious of the mechanics of the market and what will be successful. Although we represent artists, I also deal in the secondary market and I'm going to continue to do that because it's something I've done since long before opening Totah and it supports the gallery's program and my projects and it helps me keep a foot in history. I don't think the gallery can be just for emerging artists or solely for the secondary market.



Left: Installation of "Cosmic Connections," with works, from left to right, by Joan Miró, Giorgio de Chirico, Joseph Cornell, and Oscar Dominguez. Top: *Suspended in Green (A7)*, 2005, by Laurretta Vinciarelli, in watercolor on paper.

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE

I don't think of what I am doing as a business model, but more as an idea to be supported by business tactics. I find that not looking at what's going on around me helps me maintain this identity that I am creating. You start losing yourself when you look at what your neighbors are doing too much and start tweaking how you operate based on the success of others in your field. If you try to follow the steps of someone else who found success, it will be very hard to replicate what has already been done; the only way to be truly successful is if you allow yourself to be 100 percent yourself, regardless of what is in front of you. If you try to do what others have done, you end up with a derivative of a derivative. And that's not success. ☐

