

THE GENIUS LIST



David Totah —Gallerist

Photo by Isabelle Le Normand

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David Totah is a gallerist based in New York City. Although he grew up in a family of art dealers and collectors, Totah began his career in finance and at 29 started his own boutique firm specializing in hedge funds investments. After years of engaging with art outside of his professional life, he decided to close his business and pursue a career in art. He began as an independent art dealer in 2011 and in 2016, he opened the gallery TOTAH in the Lower East Side.

TGL: How was your childhood?

DT: I was born in Milan. I grew up mostly with my father. My mother lived in Beirut, so I spent a lot of time there in the 1980s during the war. I always viewed my childhood in Milan as being a little bit gray like the city. It was made colorful by the encounters I had at home with the artwork coming in and out. My father was constantly changing what was on the walls, and at the time I thought it was normal to see art coming in and out. I grew up as an only child at home, which helped me boost my daydreaming. One time, they were preparing an exhibition for Calder, so there were 30 Calder's in our home. As a kid, they looked like toys. It stayed with me. We went to London a lot because the gallery my uncle and my dad had was in London. I have a specific and vivid memory of London in the '80s. It's a very different city today, I am nostalgic of my uncle and the gallery.

Lebanon brought a contrast to all this because it was a country in war. My mother was also involved in art but in a different way. When she was with my dad for a short period, she had a gallery in Milan specializing in Sumerian and Mesopotamian art. At that time, you were able to show that work about antiquities. I always had exposure to very different periods of art, and I absorbed all of that completely unconsciously. I think a lot of what I do today is based on my instinct. When I decide if I like something or not, it's probably because of unconscious memories.

TGL: When you were a teenager, you studied finance. How did you transition to art?

DT: My mum was fed up with the war in Lebanon and moved to Paris in 1989. In 1990, I moved to Paris with her to go to high school. I was coming out of a certain type of cocoon. I learned that to make something out of my life, I had to get out of my shyness. I became very ambitious and wanted to be successful. At the time, I thought the right angle was business. I really didn't think of art as a potential source of making a living. I wanted to make it big. I went to study finance at Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania as an undergrad. The idea was that I was going to work in finance and art was

going to be my passion. But when I was 19 years old, my uncle died. He was only 45, and it was a big shock for all of us.

That was a turning point, I went from being passively exposed to art to taking more active steps and educating myself on my own terms. I took an art class, and I liked certain parts, but I didn't like the parts that were rigid and academic. I decided to continue my education in the arts on my own terms. I became a member at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and went at least once a week. I started to go to every auction and would drive from Philadelphia. At the time, I could only afford to buy books, so I bought a lot of art books. That's how I educated myself, by being everywhere I could.

TGL: Can you explain your relationship with your uncle?

DT: My uncle was my cool uncle. He was much younger than my dad, he was a bit like my dad's son because he was much younger. I said things to him that I wouldn't say to my dad, we had a playful relationship. He directed me to the right music like Prince and Bob Marley when I was 12 years old. He was an extremely charismatic figure. Very tall, good looking, nonchalant but at the same time, extremely savvy in how he did his thing as a gallerist. I received two letters from Nick Serota, who was in charge of the Tate for many many years. When I opened the gallery, he wrote to me that he always liked to visit my uncle, because he was such a mercurial and passionate person who did so much for the British art scene in the '80s. He was happy that I was continuing the steps of the family.

TGL: After graduating, you worked in finance too?

DT: Yes. I graduated in 1998 and went to work in finance. I was in finance for about 15 years. I worked for a bank initially, and then I created my own company when I was 29. It was exciting to create my own firm before I turned 30, so I was motivated from an entrepreneurial standpoint. Art was always what I did on the side. I kept going to every show and reading as much as I could. Right before starting my business actually, I was working at the bank and happened to make a very large deal in art at the time. For me, it was unexpected. It was exactly what I needed at the time, because I was in so much debt, and it kind of scared me. I did the deal and went back into finance.

TGL: What was the art deal?

DT: It was like a complex deal, because it was a Picasso that was in Japan. I happened to know the person who controlled the paintings, and I knew somebody who was looking for a specific painting that had all the

characteristics. The stars aligned. I was 27 when that happened, but I had become good at what I was doing in finance so I didn't want to leave it.

TGL: What did you do in finance?

DT: My job in finance was more predominantly tilted towards psychology. I was a filter and gatekeeper for my investors. In reality, I was spending all the time with hedge fund managers, deciding whether they were a fit for our clients or not. It is a finance job, but 75% of it was trusting my intuition about somebody's skills, ethics, and ability in interpreting the market. When I started my firm, it was a high end boutique that I was excited to do. Still, art was always there.

TGL: Why did you decide to leave finance?

DT: After about seven years of having my own business, I started to become demotivated. I thought the whole hedge fund industry had become institutionalized, that entrepreneurial spirit was gone. I was looking for something more stimulating. I was depressed. When I was upstate for a weekend, I read an interview about a successful businesswoman who lost her husband and raised their three kids. The interviewer asked the question: What did you advise your kids to do as teenagers in life? She replied, "Think about the one thing that you would do no matter what, even if you didn't get paid and just do that." It was a second catalyst many years after my uncle died. That interview made me ask myself the same question. We were in our mid-thirties, and my friends were starting to make money and buying art. A lot of them would ask me before they bought something, "What do you think?" And I would tell them yes or no. I did it for free.

I made the decision to come back to the office on the Monday after that weekend and told everyone that we were going to slowly shift business and add art. We had beautiful offices facing Central Park, and I started curating shows in the offices. I always liked putting together established historical artists with younger, emerging artists and seeing how they matched together. I did something similar here with Fontana and Mara de Luca. There is no shift in low art or high art.

We had a lot of hedge fund managers coming to us to raise money and they would always ask, "Who chose the art here?" It created a dialogue. But I couldn't do both anymore, and I gradually told all my clients and my finance business that my heart was no longer in it. I killed my business to go completely into art in 2012.

TGL: What did you do when you closed your company?

DT: I gradually phased out of my company and moved offices downtown. I started to become much more active in art as a private dealer and advisor. I realized that my favorite part of it was when I interacted with artists and being part of the creative process. I unconsciously started to realize the power of alchemy, ideas that were discussed together could lead to great things. I would get some artists' shows in different galleries to the point that I said, "I want to do it. Why don't I do it?" And so, the natural process of things was to open a space and have a gallery. I wanted to create a space that a collector, observer and art lover couldn't find out there.

TGL: What did you want your gallery to be like?

DT: I selfishly created a space that would meet all the things that I wanted to find in a gallery. A lot of the ingredients today are rare, because the pace of the art world is too fast. It became much bigger, it's no longer the art world that we can talk about, it's really the art industry. I wanted to go back in time and recreate a place where we had our own pace and risk being anachronistic. A place that was not defined by the name gallery. I wanted a place that would not have a strict definition of what it is but that had a strong identity.

I worked very hard on building this over the past five years by really engaging in every aspect, every detail, and every single thing - from curating to books to design - to create a place that would feel safe to others with the same frame of mind. We opened the gallery in February 2016.

TGL: How did you form relationships with artists, for example with Kenny Scharf?

DT: It's all about the alchemy and the love that allows me to communicate with an artist because that feeling leads to incredible projects. It's really about trust and faith in each other and about wanting to bring something to the table that is new or interesting. When I started, I told the artist, "Every show has a subtle message that is important to me, but it doesn't always need to be explicit." The friendship and the relationship that gets built with the artists are the seminal point of what this place is about. Not only trusting each other but also trusting that I am really here to constantly try to share what that artist has to share in the best way. I have a strong sense of the DNA of the soul of the artist. I can link it to an artwork and say, "This is the best." What the artist is doing when they create the artwork aligns with the shape of the artist's soul.

My relationship with Kenny is extraordinary, I actually met him when I was 14 with my father because my uncle had shown him in his gallery in '89 or '90. We

went to visit his studio at the time in Miami. I remember two things: it was a very luminous day because Kenny is made out of light and a red convertible Cadillac that he had painted all over. I hadn't thought about Kenny since then, until 2015. I was going through a phase of my life where I was extremely introverted and going through my own discoveries. One night, I woke up at 3:00 AM and Kenny came to mind, and I didn't know why. I decided to reconnect with him after 25 years. I asked my dad if he still had Kenny's number. He said, "No, but I have an old phone book, maybe it's still in there." So he sent me his number, and I texted Kenny: Hey, it's David. We met 25 years ago in your studio, I was 14. Somehow you came to mind and I want to know why, and I was wondering where you are these days. I got a response two hours later: Hey David. I'm in LA. Nice to hear from you. I'm coming to New York next week. Would love to reconnect.

At the time, I was spending a lot of time alone and often had dinner at Omen. This woman started talking to me, she asked me what I was doing in life. I told her that I was about to open a gallery. She replied, "My best friend just left his gallery." I asked her, "Who's your best friend?" And she said, "Kenny Scharf." She was Kenny's friend from the '80s, Maripol. She's a French artist. I thought this was a little crazy. So that's how I really reconnected with Kenny. I was trying to understand why this connection came in the middle of the night, and I thought, we're in the lower east side where people tag everything, and Kenny is a legend here.

TGL: How did you become friends with Mel Bochner?

DT: I started to be very interested in Mel's work, because I grew up seeing a lot of Alighiero Boetti. My uncle and my dad had been showing Boetti from the early days in the '80s. I was a kid, but I knew him. I saw a multitude of works by Boetti with the letters, and I always liked that idea of works with a text and letter. It was a way to present artwork that actually led you somewhere else. I loved that Bochner was doing that in a colorful way on mediums that were not really common, because he works on velvet. When I had the other office, I sold a lot of Bochner, initially works on paper. When I met him, I said, "You know you're my American Boetti?" And he loved it. He told me the story that he actually met Boetti in the '70s in Turin. For my first show and the opening of my gallery, the most logical thing to do was to juxtapose Boetti and Bochner. Boetti was a tribute to my past, my family and Italy. Bochner is a New Yorker. They were born in the same year, 1940. They met in 1970. I love exploring connections between creative minds.

TGL: How about your relationship with Helen Pashgian?

DT: I was having dinner with an artist friend of mine, Brian Wills, and we were talking about connections. I was going to do a show of his work. He suggested Peter Alexander and I wasn't really energized by it. And then, he said, "Oh there's this woman, Helen Pashgian, who said in a talk that she thought Wills was an interesting new generation light and space artist." I liked that link, but I had never heard of her. So I googled her right then and there. There's one artwork that she did in 1968 that made me want to meet her. It was beautiful. I met her through Wills and decided to do that show in 2017. It was Brian Wills and Helen Pashgian.

TGL: How would you describe your relationship to collectors?

DT: I am a collector, and I do everything from that angle. Meaning, I would never be able to sell something that I wouldn't collect myself. A true collector is a hunter, and I'm very respectful of that dynamic. A hunter is looking for an animal on the run. If you present a hunter with a dead animal, he's not going to be interested. The thrill is gone. I'm conscious of that dynamic. I try to present things in a way where I put a seed and then see what happens from there. I'm never pushy, and I never really go after people. I feel like we spend so much time and dedication putting together shows and programs, that we have an audience who actually trusts the program and really sees the link between the shows.

Of course, there is work behind making sure that the new artists we work with are put out there, but we try to do it in a way that is conscious of people's boundaries. The art world is extremely aggressive, bombarding people with too much information, and as a collector, I don't like it. We try to keep a good balance between putting what we do out there and letting people come to us. We are inclusive of everyone, but we do have a loyal collector base that understands how we operate. I can rely on having their eyes set on what is our next show. Having said that, we're always looking at ways to expand our audience.

TGL: Could you explain what it is like working on mysterious, fascinating art deals?

DT: It was way more mysterious back in the '80s and '90s when there was no email and people were traveling with transparencies. There was no internet, so the gossip aspect of the art world was really word of mouth. That was a mystery because you were not able to send an image to 30 people by email. You would travel from London to New York with a transparency to see if that person would be interested in that painting. It was probably less efficient, and the art world was much smaller at the time. In the digital age, that mystery has eroded quite a bit.

When I left finance, I started as a mostly secondary market dealer. I focused on all sorts of things, including large deals. I did a Rothko deal, a Richter deal, and I did many Picasso deals. That was really what I did full-time. As I started to build a gallery and have a program with artists, my time spent on the secondary market has decreased because I can't do everything. I still do secondary market deals with very few people I know. I always keep a foot in art history, and I like that about the secondary market because I never left it. I grew up in it with my family, and I continue engaging in it. It is extremely helpful when I want to juxtapose a lesser known artist or emerging artist with a historical artist. I enjoy doing these group shows at least once a year in the gallery. I always want to keep this balance, and we've built a program with nine represented artists. The time that I can dedicate to the secondary market is much less, but it's still an important part of what we do.

TGL: Who would you like to have dinner with that you don't know?

DT: Leonardo da Vinci. Not only for everything that he's done and for how wide of a genius he was, but also because he's the one artist that twice in a row, I found myself in front of his work with tears coming out of my eyes. I want to understand why. Going back to this soul connection I can feel with the artist, I feel like this guy was such an enlightened person. I wonder what a dinner with Leonardo would be like, because I wouldn't even know where to start. I like the fact that he is somebody not from our period. He was so ahead of the curve then already, it would be refreshing to meet somebody who has not been through the industrial revolution, the internet, or any of that stuff. To go back to certain aspects of humanity before we got deluded with excess information and excess accessibility of everything.

TGL: What advice would you like to give to The Genius List's readers?

DT: What helps me in every situation is being mindful of what feels right from a physical standpoint too. If you feel a twitch in your belly about something that doesn't feel right, and then your mind tells you that you have to do it, don't do it. Even if all the logic makes sense, don't. Or vice versa. I always follow a thread that is respectful of what the trajectory of my own story is. That's where you get surprises along the way. Sometimes you get anxieties like, "Was it right that I did that?" But when you look back, you always get that validation, "Thank God I did it that way." That's what I think keeps a person intact over time and keeps their integrity intact.
