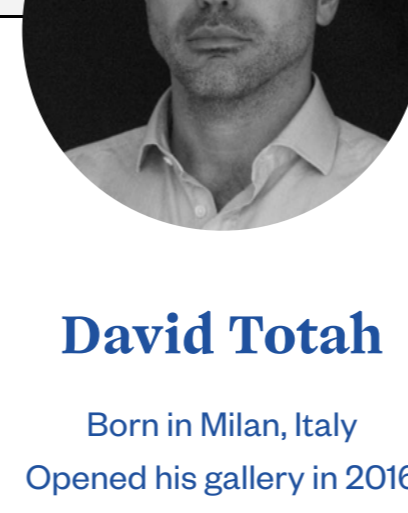




GALLERY INTERVIEW

A conversation with David Totah

June 30, 2020



David Totah

Born in Milan, Italy
Opened his gallery in 2018
Lower East Side

TOTAH is a relative newcomer to the Lower East Side gallery scene, bringing with it a fresh approach to curating exhibitions. Offering a collaborative space between artist and dealer, its founder David Totah describes the gallery as a "cultural hub harboring a variety of projects which transcend the typical definition of a gallery."

How did you end up in the art world?

A mix of faith and predestined vocation. I grew up in a family that was heavily involved in the arts, and through them I was always exposed to it. In my late teenage years I discovered art was my passion, and always approached it from a personal standpoint rather than a professional one. After I opened my gallery, I received a letter from the former head of the Tate in London. He had known my uncle, Edward Totah, who had a gallery in London in the 1980s. The letter made me both melancholic and proud: it made me think of the times I had been with him in London when I was young. My uncle introduced me to Prince and Bob Marley. I would go to his place in my early teenage years, and he never had furniture. Paintings were on the ground, not hung. He didn't drive, he always took a cab or metro. He was very deconstructed, and very free. He had a nonchalance and cool that I often miss in today's world.



Alex Sewell, Temples, 2019, oil on canvas, 63 x 82 inches (90 x 132 cm)

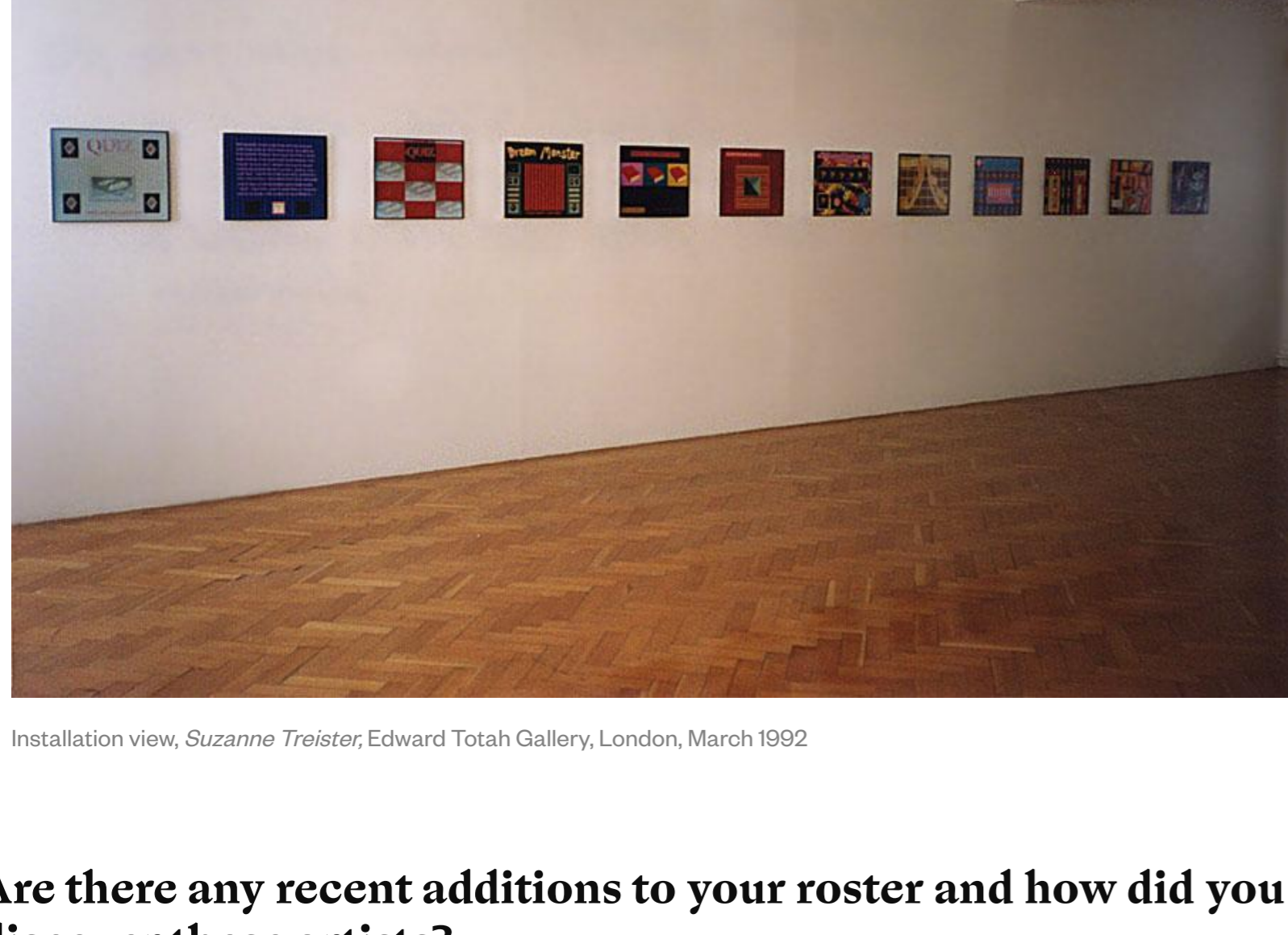
How do you live with art yourself?

I like to spend a lot of time by myself, so art allows me to feel closer to humanity and the people that made the work. At home only the ceilings have white walls, and I have a lot of pieces in storage. Rehanging is a cathartic process — it takes about a day, and happens every six months or so. Living with new works allows me to tap into a new energy. It's like a new vacation spot. It doesn't mean that I don't like my old vacation spot, but it's a new energy and experience. I also make a point to buy pieces from the artists that we represent. At home, I show them alongside historical artists, which is a way for me to see that our artists can live among artists from the past and feel that there isn't a disconnect.

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What would you like the gallery to be known for?

I want the gallery to be a nexus of culture and ideas. The gallery maintains a strong focus on developing exhibitions in close collaboration with our artists, and we want to transcend the definition of what a gallery is traditionally known for. Our artists aren't necessarily responding to current trends, but I think that gives our program integrity and a very palpable identity that comes from the artists we work with. Even though visually they are all very different, all of our artists have something in common. And that thing is felt, not written about, or talked about, but it's an aura.



Installation view, Suzanne Treister: Edward Totah Gallery, London, March 1992

Are there any recent additions to your roster and how did you discover these artists?

Melissa McGill is our most recent addition. I discovered Melissa's work at Nancy Olnick and Giorgio Spanu's Magazzino in upstate New York. Melissa had a sound piece in their office. It was a box with a specific shape, and it played the sounds that you'd hear in the piazza of Venice. I liked the concept that a piece could allow you to tap into a different world at your fingertips. Melissa's work is significantly focused on public projects. We immediately clicked, and I feel that she shines a light on things that need to be discussed, which I think is one of the key things that artists do for us as a society.

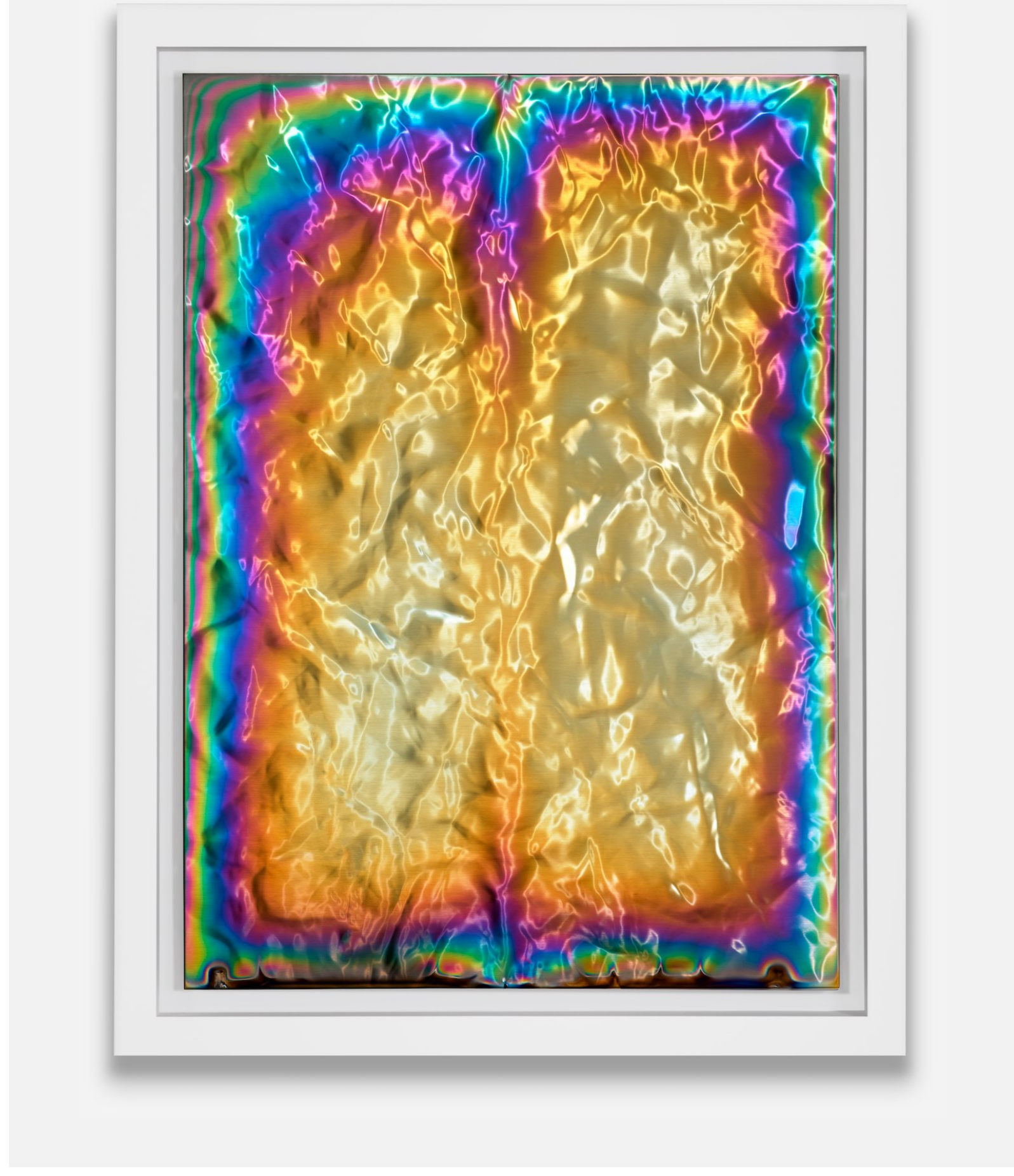
"[Melissa McGill] shines a light on things that need to be discussed, which I think is one of the key things that artists do for us as a society."



Installation view, Melissa McGill: RED:REGATTA, rffesee, TOTAH, New York, January 18-March 1, 2020

What is the best and the hardest part of running your gallery?

The best part of running the gallery is channeling our energies and creativity and materializing it into concrete physical projects. I put this into the first foreword of my first show: Verba Volant, Scripta Manent — words fly but what is written stays — which is what I intend to do with my gallery. Every show has a message — and even though those things are not necessarily stated, they remain as a feeling. We produce exhibition catalogues that become a remnant of the work, words, and feelings that we put into the show. My uncle also produced catalogues for his shows, and someone gifted them to me upon opening my gallery. These catalogues have become a physical representation of my uncle's work and a reminder of him. The hardest part is the responsibility that I feel towards my artists. You want them to be constantly rewarded and praised for their work. However, the audience does not always perceive the work as you do. That gap requires patience. However, I would like to think that if the work is great, that it will be recognized — even if that may take a little longer.



Aleksandar Duracovic, YCU7/G (2019), chemically treated stainless steel, 27 1/2 x 19 1/2 inches (70 x 50 cm)

How do you think the art world will change in the next decade?

I always thought that an exogenous factor could impact the art world, and this virus has obviously had a tremendous effect, canceling all fairs for the foreseeable future. I think that this is an opportunity for galleries to invite new collectors to discover artists more slowly, and experience art with like-minded individuals in more intimate spaces.

In your time as a gallerist, what are the biggest changes you've seen in collecting?

I think as the audience has expanded, more commercially-friendly art has been promoted, taking some focus from the thought-provoking nature of art. I think there might be a shift of interest towards art that touches us to our core and that makes us think.

"The gallery is a nexus for kindred spirits; the audience, artists, writers, and others that feel drawn to each other and the program."

How do you hope to engage with new collectors?

I'm always excited to meet new people and understand what brings a new collector to us and our artists. The gallery is a nexus for kindred spirits; the audience, artists, writers, and others that feel drawn to each other and the program. I particularly love if a collector falls in love with an artist that they hadn't heard of before.



Mara De Luca, BEAUMONT, 2017, mixed media on cut canvas with copper plated elements, 66 x 96 inches (97.6 x 243.8 cm)

Can you tell us about one of the pieces or artists currently featured in your Parlor collection?

Mara De Luca creates these atmospheric and celestial landscapes where you think you know what you're seeing but you don't, because she's always on the edge of abstraction with just an illusion of figuration. Her process is labor-intensive, requiring weeks of layering paint, but she doesn't burden you with that effort. She's similar to a writer who can put a very complex thought into a couple of words. It's meditative in that the thousands of layers make you feel as if you're looking at a sunset or a sunrise. And being in Los Angeles allows her to be immersed in that light that she translates into her paintings.

Other works from TOTAH.

