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The (23-Year-) Old Masters

A hot art market is stoking prices for artists barely out of their teens. Our reporter on high-school talent searches, a sale to Michael Ovitz -- and what you can get for \$6,000.

By KELLY CROW

From his airy studio in San Francisco's Mission District, Keegan McHargue makes acrylic-on-paper paintings that sell as fast as dealers around the world can unpack them. Rosson Crow has a waiting list for her paintings, which sell for as much as \$16,000, and major museums are screening video pieces by Ryan Trecartin -- a "virtuoso," as the Getty gushes.

But for all these accolades, there's one thing these artists haven't achieved: a 26th birthday.



Art, from left to right, "Twin Parts" by Dana Schutz/Zach Feuer Gallery (LFL); "Untitled (Decomposition)" by Barney Kulok/Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery; "My New Home" by Logan Grider/Tilton Gallery.

hairs -- are skeptical about this youth movement. For every Robert Rauschenberg or Frank Stella who rose to prominence before the age of 30, there are many more whose careers flamed out. The buying spree also is speculative. Dealers tend to view the work of young artists the way investors view penny stocks, often buying pieces from dozens of unknowns in the hopes of making one big strike. In the art world, the strategy is known as "Spray and Pray."

Keegan McHargue / "Extraction, 2004" / \$15,000

In the current market, however, this approach is becoming more attractive. Last year's \$4.2 billion world-wide sales figure for fine-art auctions was a 15% increase over the prior year, according to Artprice, an online data company that tracks art auctions. Not only have rates skyrocketed for icons like Picasso and Van Gogh, but the average auction price in 2004 for a work by a living artist between 25 and 45 was \$80,700 -- up from \$32,500 in 1990 when prices reached another historical peak. Works by art students, meanwhile, almost never run higher than \$20,000.

Jack Tilton, a veteran art dealer in New York, says that until recently he preferred to wait a few years before offering a show to promising artists, believing they needed time to "ripen." But now, he says, "We pick them up six years early, like the NBA."

This spring, Mr. Tilton says he combed several hundred studios at a few top East Coast art schools including Yale, Columbia and Hunter College, and mounted a show using work by 19 current MFA, or master-of-fine-arts, students. At least 70% of this "School Days" show sold within two days, he says, at prices ranging from \$1,200 to \$16,000. Afterward, a few artists found themselves with waiting lists, largely because they hadn't yet created enough work to satisfy the demand. The event was such a success, Mr. Tilton says, he's planning to scour schools in Chicago, Boston and Los Angeles.

While young artists tend to be accessible and grateful for patronage, some dealers say working with them has its downsides. San Francisco dealer Jack Hanley says younger artists cancel shows and miss deadlines more than older artists because they get "psyched out" or overcommit themselves to multiple galleries. He says he's sent bail money to some and loaned cash to others. "They blow through a ton of money," he says. "And some of them call every day, so I have to hear about their girlfriends."

Museums have another problem: Many of these artists are so new that it's hard to get collectors to hand over their work. When the Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University wanted to build a show around Dana Schutz, a painter who made her New York debut only four years ago at 25, some collectors were initially reluctant to lend canvases, which they had only recently acquired. "She's such a hot item," says chief curator Raphaela Platow, "they didn't want to let them go."

So much for spending years toiling in obscurity -- or even starving -- to catch the fancy of the art world. With global auction sales hitting \$4.2 billion last year and scores of new galleries fighting for inventory, some dealers are reaching out to a largely untapped group of American artists: the impossibly precocious. From art hubs like New York to spots like Fort Wayne, Ind., dealers, collectors and museum curators are scouting artists still in their teens and early 20s. Painters who aren't old enough to rent a car are hiring personal assistants, turning down interviews and having their work snapped up by such major collectors as Michael Ovitz and Charles Saatchi.

"Is it a mature work?" Mr. Ovitz says about a painting he recently bought, by a 25-year-old Yale student. "No. But it resonated with me."

At the Whitney Museum of American Art's current biennial show, 12 of the 101 featured artists are in their 20s -- up from six at the last show. Nearly two dozen small contemporary museums are showing works by artists in their 20s, while some art-school grads are becoming dealers themselves by promoting work by classmates and friends. Veteran galleries and nonprofit art spaces are organizing group shows with titles like "Whippersnappers," "Under 30" and "Under Age." Recently served at a young-artist gallery opening in Fort Wayne, Ind.: Gummi bears and juice boxes.

Just two years ago, Ms. Crow was an art-school student who had sold a few of her wall-size oil paintings of haunting interiors for just \$800 each. Since then, she's had shows at major galleries in New York and Paris and sold work for as much as \$16,000 to collectors like Gregory Miller, who sits on the painting and sculpture committee at the Whitney. She's sold everything she's done so far, save one canvas. ("I only just finished it," she explains.) Later this year, she's moving to Paris to do an artist's residency. "No more getting coffee for anyone else," she says.

Buying Spree

Some art collectors and scholars -- not to mention artists who already have a few gray

For the artists, the sudden shift into the spotlight can be abrupt and, at times, a little intimidating. Logan Grider is the 25-year-old Yale student whose work -- a painting of a ship titled "My New Home" -- was recently purchased by Mr. Ovitiz. When a gallery owner told Mr. Grider that the former Hollywood agent had spent \$5,000 for the work, the artist reacted by going home and logging on to his computer. "I didn't know who he was," he says. "So I Google-searched him."

Ted Mineo / "Communion" / \$12,000

For others, the sudden acclaim allows them to pay off student loans, buy studios and, in some cases, live the life of an international celebrity. After starting out working shifts at an art store in Portland, Ore., Mr. McHargue, the 23-year-old painter, is showing at three major galleries and selling paintings for up to \$15,000. The proceeds pay for his designer suits, a home-recording studio and lots of travel. A few months ago, he says his Parisian gallery threw a three-course banquet for 500 in his honor at Maxim's, one of the city's top restaurants. "It was pretty luxurious," he says.

Classroom Commerce

All this attention puts art schools in a difficult position. While the notoriety of some recent graduates helps justify climbing tuition -- \$38,000 a year or so at the priciest schools -- faculty members still struggle with how much commerce to allow during the classroom years. Peter Halley, Yale's director of graduate studies in painting, says that while most professors are wary of students selling or showing works while in school, half of the 43 graduating MFA painting students are already showing at galleries. Two years ago, when the school started a daylong open house where outsiders could roam through the studios looking at student works, the attendance was rarely higher than 100. Now three times that many are showing up, Mr. Halley says, and the next open studio will be stretched out over two days. (One increasingly invoked rule: Students can't accept checks at the event.)

Still, there's no keeping the collectors away. At a recent open house for MFA students at Columbia University, the shoppers included John Friedman, a board member of New York's New Museum and a major collector of student art. He and Mr. Tilton, with camera in tow, spent hours weaving through a warren of studios and in at least four cases, handing out business cards. When Mr. Friedman happened upon a series of "marvelous" paintings of neon geometric shapes created by Davis Rhodes, a lanky 23-year-old Vassar graduate, the student apologized for not having a card in kind. Then he scribbled his information on a flier. "I'd love to get a few, at least two," Mr. Friedman told him.

Ryan Trecartin with Jesse Greenberg / "Mango Lady" / Owner: Charles Saatchi

"Cool," Mr. Rhodes replied.

Not so cool, perhaps, to any artist over 30. Ellen Harvey, a 38-year-old Conceptual painter in New York who quit a job as a lawyer 10 years ago, was astonished when one nonprofit exhibition space described her a few years ago as a "midcareer" artist. Ms. Harvey had to remind organizers that she's relatively new on the scene.

After 20 years in the profession, Steed Taylor, 46, says he makes about \$40,000 a year from sales of his art -- mostly installations dealing with themes of mourning and remembrance -- but like many career artists, has to rely on public grants. When asked about the meteoric success of some younger artists, he sighs. "There's no waiting list for me."

Business Acumen

There are risks to sudden stardom, of course. Most young artists have very little business acumen and aren't always represented by dealers who will protect their economic interests. Last year Jon Kessler, an associate professor and former chairman of Columbia University School of the Arts, says he discovered that one of the school's students, Natalie Frank, now 26, had sold nearly every piece in her studio to collector Richard Massey. This practice is dangerous, he says, because a collector with disproportionate holdings in an artist's work can affect its market price. "I thought seriously about the issue," says Ms. Frank. "But after meeting Richard, I could immediately tell that any quantity of work would be safe in his hands."

Some artists have managed to become (and remain) household names after being discovered at a tender age. The last great raid on youthful artists in the 1980s produced names like Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat and David Salle. But there were cautionary tales even then. In 1984, collector Charles Saatchi sold off seven paintings by Italian artist Sandro Chia, and afterward the artist's market value was depressed for years. "I don't buy art to ingratiate myself to artists," Mr. Saatchi told the Art Newspaper. Mr. Chia didn't return requests for comment.

Barney Kulok / "Skillman Avenue" / \$1,800

Scholars say the jury is still out on these artistic prospects. In general, they say, landing paintings in major collections is a better indicator of professional longevity than the prices they command. And it's unlikely that any greater proportion of student works will wind up in museums or textbooks. "In 20 years, people may call this time a new Renaissance -- or they may say it was all horrible," says David Carrier, a faculty member at the Cleveland Institute of Art and Case Western Reserve University. Either way, he predicts, most of these works will "disappear."



Barney Kulok / "Skillman Avenue" / \$1,800

Collectors aren't deterred. Mr. Friedman, who says he enjoys playing mentor to young artists, will continue trolling the student shows. Robert Shimshak, a radiologist in Berkeley, Calif., says he'll keep buying student work in part because he can't afford to buy six-figure favorites like Ed Ruscha.

Arthur Zeckendorf, a residential real-estate developer in New York, says he grew up watching his grandfather collect Degas and his mother collect Diebenkorn. Five years ago, he began buying work but kept to artists in their 30s. He figured anyone younger was too risky. But a couple of months ago, he overruled himself and paid \$13,000 for a garden scene with oranges by the 25-year-old Ms. Frank. He plans to hang it in his Miami Beach condominium: "Our designer loves it."

Caution: Wet Paint

With prices rising across the art market, some collectors are scouring schools and new galleries in hopes of snapping up the next Warhol. Here, in alphabetical order, are a few hopefuls who are 26 or younger, with their top sales prices and early claims to fame:

ARTIST/AGE	TOP SALE	WHO HAS ONE?	COMMENTS
Rosson Crow 23	Haunting interior, \$16,000	Banker and collector Gregory Miller	Ms. Crow, who grew up in Texas, says she was influenced by her mother's jet-interior designs; the artist's huge paintings depict the trappings and moods of rooms, often ornate and vividly colored. The graduate of New York's School of Visual Arts is about to finish a master's degree from Yale's School of Art and plans to join an artists' residency program in Paris later this year.
Natalie Frank 26	Narrative tableau of two women, \$16,000	Richard Massey, a biotech entrepreneur	Ms. Frank is known for her large-scale allegorical representations of grotesque women, war imagery and carnivalesque figures. Her first solo show, this spring, sold out, and one New York gallery, Briggs Robinson, says it has a waiting list a dozen names long. She will graduate next month with a master's in fine arts from Columbia University.
Rashawn Griffin 25	Fabric-covered panel joined by planks, \$4,500	Detroit collector, museum trustee Burt Aaron	After studying painting in Maryland and sculpture at Yale, Mr. Griffin caught the eye of dealer Thomas Erben and curators at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Mr. Griffin's Conceptual work often blends a "canvas" of tightly packed jellybeans and panels of found fabric fragments.
Barney Kulok 24	Photograph of a peeling copy of Warhol's Double Elvis, \$2,500	Collectors Anne and Joel Berson	This New York native graduated from Bard College in 2004 and until recently worked for Brazilian artist Vik Muniz. (He says he "phased out of that" to focus on his own art.) He's known for videos and photographs of nighttime urban streets lit by billboards. Sarah Lawrence photography professor Joel Sternfeld has jokingly introduced him to others as a "young Mozart."

<p>Zane Lewis 25</p>	<p>Installation of a room lined with glowing vials of pink lemonade, \$5,000</p>	<p>Guillermo Nicolas, board member of San Antonio's Artpace</p>	<p>Mr. Lewis, born in San Antonio, was studying at the Atlanta College of Art two years ago when he was invited to be the youngest artist ever shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia. (His exhibit was a row of translucent tubes pumped with blue ink.) He recently took pictures of famous fountains, then converted them on a computer to paint-by-number templates. The completed paintings sold quickly.</p>
<p>Keegan McHargue 23</p>	<p>Painting of a reservoir and a room with paralyzed women, \$15,000</p>	<p>Museum of Modern Art, New York</p>	<p>Who needs art school? Mr. McHargue grew up in Portland, Ore., and started drawing and painting on his own after moving to San Francisco at 19. He's known for neo-pagan scenes populated with mother figures and beehives and drawn with tattoo precision. MoMA owns four of his works. The latest Armory Show, an art fair in New York, had three gallery booths with his paintings.</p>
<p>Ted Mineo 25</p>	<p>Painting of a pizza, \$12,000</p>	<p>Florida attorney John Morrissey</p>	<p>Raised in the New Orleans suburbs, Mr. Mineo has studied art at the Maryland Institute College of Art and Yale. His muse, he says, is food. (He's painted intricate images of hamburgers and even a muffaletta sandwich topped by a crown of thorns.) "It's great to think about pizza all day, and figure out how to maybe save the world by doing that," he says. Proceeds from his art sales are going to pay off his student loans, he adds. "I still don't have health insurance."</p>
<p>Dash Snow 24</p>	<p>Installation with mirror, cinderblocks and chair, \$13,000</p>	<p>Private curator Yvonne Force</p>	<p>Mr. Snow spent much of his New York childhood trolling subway tunnels with a Polaroid camera, and the teen's raw but romantic photos of his arty friends were big sellers at a New York gallery, Rivington Arms. He's currently serving a 20-day community-service sentence in Los Angeles. Mr. Snow says his lawyer won't let him talk about the offense, but the artist says the time will serve as an inspiration: "I'm making a 'zine about it."</p>