



Gallerist Dominique Lévy opened her eponymous gallery specializing in postwar and contemporary art in 2013.

A

Dealer Dominique Lévy began attending Art Basel in Switzerland when she was

LIFELONG

just 4 years old. Here, she reminisces with Julie Belcove about falling in love with

LOVE

art at the fairs, the evolution of her career, and running away to the circus.

AFFAIR

It might sound odd that Dominique Lévy—the art dealer who boasts galleries in New York and London and has an accomplished record of mounting scholarly exhibitions on such seminal figures as Alexander Calder, Frank Stella, and Yves Klein—has no recollection whatsoever of her first trip to Art Basel. Then again, she was only 4 years old. Whatever art may have caught her eye was viewed from the not necessarily ideal vantage point of her pram.

In the 44 years since, Art Basel—both the original Swiss show, as well as the iteration in Miami Beach—has been a mainstay of Lévy's life. It has helped shape her professional career as well as her substantial personal collection. Yet, from taking a dip in the Rhine to stealing away to the circus, the annual rite has come to claim an outsize symbolism to Lévy.

"I grew up in Switzerland in a family that was interested in art, especially my mother," Lévy recounts over lunch across Madison Avenue from her elegant, three-story gallery. "It became a family tradition. I suppose I completely owe it to her. Because [the art world] was a place that was fun and fulfilling for her, it became a place that I was also drawn to."

Her mother, Evelyn, had been born while Lévy's grandmother was fleeing the 1940 Nazi invasion of Belgium. Evelyn's subsequent years spent in the United States fueled her lifelong love of American culture, even after she returned to Europe. Living in Lausanne, Switzerland, with Lévy's father,

André, a wealthy currency trader, Evelyn amassed a collection of American Pop and other contemporary art. She frequented the great galleries of the time, from Ernst Beyeler to Bruno Bischofberger, as well as Leo Castelli on trips to New York. "She felt stifled in Switzerland," Lévy says, her French-accented English almost a whisper. "For her the art world was a breath of fresh air."

When Lévy was a child, the fair, of course, didn't hold her undivided attention. It so happened that Circus Knie, more than 200 years old and Switzerland's biggest, erected its tent in Basel every June as well. Lévy and her sister cut a deal with their mother: They would find one or two things to look at seriously at the fair, and then they could go to the circus. The two spectacles perhaps intersected in Lévy's mind. She once even played out her version of running away to the circus: Beginning in her early teens, she performed as a clown at children's birthday parties and in hospitals, creating her own "face" and amassing a collection of clown shoes along the way.

But art was ultimately the big pull, and Basel was an inextricable element. What she describes as the "madness" and "chaos" of the fair contrasted sharply with the prim and proper milieu of Lausanne. "What I do remember I still cherish—this excess, this mess, this too much, this bombardment of colors, smells, information, shocks," she says. "Things I hated. I remember thinking, 'This is art? This is sculpture?' and then [finally] arriving at, 'Oh, here I feel comfortable.' That I viscerally remember. For me to see pieces of wood that

were meant as sculpture, or masses of clothes—I remember the first [Christian] Boltanskis and Annette Messager. I remember seeing [Anselm] Kiefer in the art fair, being shocked by the scale.

“To this day, when I walk into an art fair, it’s that kind of energy which forces you to select, to experience, to open yourself,” she continues. “You cannot go to an art fair if you’re close-minded. That was most formative for me about Art Basel.”

The first time Lévy bought an artwork at Basel with her own money she was 18. “It was all my pocket money,” she says. “It must have been a few hundred francs or something.” Shortly after this initial purchase, she curated her first show: a group exhibition of about 16 young Swiss artists installed in a house. “Each of them got a room,” Lévy recalls. “We sold out. It was more than exciting.”

With the exception of one year when she had final exams at school, Lévy has never missed an Art Basel in Switzerland. She missed the inaugural year of Art Basel in Miami Beach to give birth to her first child (unlike her mother, she leaves her sons at home, preferring to give her family and her work, respectively, her undivided attention).

Lévy’s Art Basel rhythms stuttered for the first time in the 1990s, when she went to the show not purely as an art lover but as a gallery employee. Suddenly she was no longer strolling the aisles, but manning the esteemed London dealer Anthony d’Offay’s booth. “The first year I found it incredibly frustrating because you’re actually chained to your booth,” she says. While gallery owners have the luxury of arriving early to oversee the booth’s installation and check out the competition, “when you’re one of the team, you get there a few hours before to save money on hotels. You’re in your booth, and you’re done.” She remembers asking everyone who stopped by the stand, “What did you see?”

Lévy’s subsequent years working at Christie’s were strange in another way when June rolled around each year. Auction house employees are inevitably viewed as enemies of the dealers. “And you are... absolutely,” she says. “I had a tiny advantage because when I was at Christie’s I was in private sales, so I was a bit less of the enemy because I would work with dealers. But you feel like a complete outsider.”

Still, the relationships forged in her childhood days at Basel and the broader art world served her well. Her mother frequently brought Lévy to Ernst Beyeler’s (one of the founders of Art Basel) gallery in Basel. “He had a second passion, which was walking the mountains. It’s also something that I love,” she says. “He’d talk art with anyone who wanted to talk art. He was

a bit like a rough mountain man—very simple, no bullshit. The first thing I do when I look at a painting is [look at] the back. How often a great painting has a Beyeler label.”

After joining Christie’s, by which time she had made several transactions with Beyeler on behalf of clients, “I was given a very beautiful Cubist Picasso for sale, and he bought it for the museum [Beyeler Foundation]; it’s still in the museum. Then he gave me a Bacon triptych—I’ll never forget—that I sold. These were my two first private sales at Christie’s. He was the kind of dealer who—however experienced, grand, and aging he was—had trust and faith in young people. I owe him big time.”

Beyeler and another great mentor, Jan Krugier, a Polish-born Holocaust survivor who made his name selling Picassos from his Geneva gallery, taught her more by deed than word. “They would talk about the painting, share, get you into the painting to start a love affair. You may or may not want to buy it,” Lévy explains. “I try as a dealer to do the same. I don’t like pushing someone. I like to take someone by the hand and say, ‘Look with me. Can you feel what I feel? Do you see what I see?’”

After leaving the auction house in 2003, Lévy joined Robert Mnuchin in his Upper East Side gallery. Together they renamed it L&M Arts and mounted smart shows, becoming a powerhouse on the secondary market. Eventually, however, the relationship soured. “Working with Bob was fantastic because we were so different, yet we were so complimentary,” she says. “Then we grew apart.” Lévy cites creative differences about such decisions as how to install shows.

“It was strange because at the end of L&M, I was constantly tired,” she continues. “I’m a bit of a hypochondriac, so I took vitamins.” Then one day Lévy was listening to the Irish poet David Whyte, who said, “The antidote to exhaustion isn’t rest. It’s wholeheartedness.”

“That quote literally changed my life,” Lévy says. “The gallery here brings me joy constantly. Yes, I’m tired sometimes, but I’m never exhausted because I’m so nourished.”

It was testament to L&M’s market power and Lévy’s hard-earned reputation that her new gallery was accepted into her first Art Basel in Switzerland after her split from Mnuchin. When Hurricane Sandy delayed construction and Lévy was forced to reschedule her planned springtime inaugural exhibition of Picasso drawings, she recalls a friend calling to report there was “noise” that her booth should be revoked because she did not technically have a gallery. Lévy responded by ordering the desks removed from her temporary offices on East 82nd Street. “I said to my team, ‘Monday, the



TOP: Dominique Lévy Gallery, 909 Madison Avenue, New York.
ABOVE: Dominique Lévy and Italian painter Enrico Castellani in Italy, August 2015.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BEN FITCHETT (GALLERY); COURTESY DOMINIQUE LÉVY (CASTELLANI)

Artist Günther Uecker, Dominique Lévy, and Dominique Lévy Gallery Senior Director Emilio Steinberger at the gallery's booth at Art Basel 2014.



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exhibition is going to open here.' We paint; we take an ad. We are open as of Monday as a gallery."

Now that she has her own booth at the fair, Lévy typically finishes installation on Monday afternoon, then sneaks off to do a little personal shopping. While she is known for dealing in postwar masterpieces, her private collection runs more toward mid-career artists. "I do my homework before, and I know who are the galleries and artists I like," she says. "I call before, and I make a little map for myself." This June, despite neck pain from a bout of shingles so severe she required daily house calls from a local doctor and flew back to New York early and in tears, she snagged an Urs Fischer sculpture from London dealer Sadie Coles.

Staying true to form, Lévy has incorporated long-time passion into her current gallery. Every June on the eve of the Basel fair opening, when the world's most active collectors and dealers descend on the Swiss town, she throws a circus party. "I said, 'If I ever do Basel under my own name, I would want to [rediscover] that link with the arts and the circus because to me some of what [circus performers] do is pure sculpture, pure performing arts. It's extraordinary."

Her friend Sandy Rower, chairman and president of the Calder Foundation, urged her to meet David Dimitri, a renowned Swiss high-wire acrobat and son of famed clown Dimitri. Lévy and David Dimitri now spend each year combing through acts to cast her Art Basel party. The Monday night party was even held under a circus tent this year and featured legendary Swiss performer Mädir Eugster as the main act, where he seemed to defy the laws of physics as he balanced long sticks in an improvised, enormous mobile resting atop his head. "For nine minutes the whole room couldn't breathe. He created on his head a mobile that went from here to where that man is sitting," Lévy says, pointing across the room. "And at the end there was a feather. Then he blew the feather, and everything fell apart. It was the most beautiful allegory about life."

It's a truth Lévy came to understand all too well two years before. Art Basel had always been about Lévy and her mother; it never really captured her father's attention, though he'd begun to accompany his wife in retirement. In 2013, as Lévy was preparing to open her first solo booth, her father André came to the dinner. "It was funny because I stood up to make my little welcome speech, and I couldn't find my piece of paper with my notes, and [he's] the first person I see—I had quite a tough relationship with my father because he was incredibly

demanding, not always happy with my life. And I just drank a toast to him. It was such a gift because I saw pride in his eyes, which I had never seen before."

The following morning, Lévy was at the fair early, worried her placement was not in a heavily trafficked area. As the doors opened, she says, "The first person who walked into my booth was my father. He had queued, he had come early, and he was not that kind of person. He was always, 'You can do better,' so tough on me."

Six weeks later, as Lévy was preparing for the real opening of her gallery, her father died in his sleep. In her grief she hired a biographer to chronicle André's extraordinary life, including his Zionism, his imprisonment in Egypt, and his escape to Europe. The book arrived shortly after she returned from Basel this year. "I suddenly realized what I had done was the mourning process," she says. It had been, in a sense, another ritual, the annual treks to Basel, the circus dinners. "I find rituals really important in my life. They ground me. They're nurturing and soothing. I didn't realize that before." **ABMB**

Exterior of the circus tent at Dominique Lévy's 2015 Art Basel dinner.



Mädir Eugster performs Sanddornbalance at Dominique Lévy's annual Art Basel dinner, June 15, 2015, in Basel, Switzerland.



Dominique Lévy performing as a clown in her teens in Switzerland.



Dominique Lévy and her parents in 2010.

