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Money-makers

Teaming With the Artists to Buoy the Bottom Line

By CAROL KINO

THE art market is booming right now, and it is not only auction houses and dealers who are taking advantage of the moment. Increasingly, museums are doing more than just exhibiting artists' work; they are also commissioning and selling it.

Visit the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Conn., and you can buy a \$1,200 framed relief sculpture by John F. Simon Jr., who won the museum's 2000 Emerging Artist Award. The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago is offering a \$20,000 dining table by Sol LeWitt. In conjunction with the 2006 Whitney Biennial, the Whitney Museum of American Art has been selling hand-printed limited-edition T-shirts for \$35 to \$50 by the Biennialist team T. Kelly Mason and Diana Thater.

The concept of the "multiple," as limited-edition sculptural objects are known, was born in the 1960's, when artists focused on making art for the masses. Many legendary print houses were formed in that era, and a few of the museums that are commissioning editions now have been doing so since the late 1970's and early 80's. One of the most notable is the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, which has produced so many multiples with so many artists since it opened in 1977 that its founder, Marion Boulton Stroud, can't recall if the first one was by Robert Kushner, Sam Gilliam or Scott Burton. The New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York began its program in 1984, with a Claes Oldenburg sculpture called "Tipsy Tilting Neon Cocktail."

"There is something utopian about it," said Philippe Vergne, the deputy director and chief curator at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, which has commissioned and sold master prints since 1971. "It's a mandate that's important to maintain — not always easy but important."

More recently, many other museums have joined the bandwagon, mostly because a successful editions program can help the bottom line. "I can make 20 of something and make \$40,000," said Maureen Sullivan, who ran the New Museum's program from 1995 until 2000. "It's all found money."

Today, as the director of marketing and special projects for Creative Time, the New York public art group, Ms. Sullivan produces yearly benefit editions. She also consults for the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, whose editions program she started in 2002, after the high-tech crash and Sept. 11 terrorist attacks sent its funding reeling. "I told them to pick an artist they'd supported through the years," she said. "Someone who's marketable."

One result was two editions by local artists, a digital print by the photographer Todd Hido (\$2,000 each for an edition of 20) and a sculpture by the multimedia artists Jim Campbell and Alan Rath (\$12,500 each for an edition of 26). Six graffiti panels by Barry McGee, a San Francisco art star, are also for sale, for \$10,000 and \$30,000.

Ms. Sullivan advised wannabe editions publishers to try to keep control of the project. "You really have to understand your materials," she said, and to keep the run low. "I'm a huge fan of doing less, and having them sell out very quickly." So far, her efforts have netted Yerba Buena more than \$80,000.

Where museum operating costs are concerned, such amounts are a drop in the bucket. But the income

helps for another reason, said Susanne Ghez, director of the Renaissance Society. "If you're going to a foundation for a grant, the grant readers will be looking at earned income versus contributed," she said. "In other words, how hard you are working to produce income."

Yet that does not mean that a fund-raising effort cannot also produce an important artwork. Since the Renaissance Society began publishing multiples in 1997, many have been acquired by other museums, starting with the first — six etched-glass canisters by Kara Walker, now in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art. "At the end of the day," said Ms. Ghez, "you're doing it really to fulfill your mission, which is to promote the work of artists."

Many museums conceive of their multiples as a membership perk. For years the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles has presented an artist-designed mouse pad to members who donate \$100 and up. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles has published occasional multiples through its development department since 1989. They can be bought only by trustees and members who donate \$1,200 and up. And the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Tex., started its publishing program in 1996, after the death of its founder, Donald Judd, left it financially vulnerable.

The associate director, Rob Weiner, said of that time: "Some of the first people to come to the aid of the museum were artists. That's when we began to conceive of the notion of asking artists who'd become part of our extended family to create something, so we could encourage more upper-level contributions."

Today, the Chinati's multiples, given to members who contribute \$1,000 and up, are made by younger artists like Jack Pierson and Cornelia Parker. The foundation also publishes prints by older artists, like John Wesley and Ilya Kabakov. These are sold to the public, usually for \$2,000 to \$5,000.

Even though artists rarely receive a fee for their work — they are usually paid with artists' proofs — most museums find them willing to get involved. "These are people that we have a good-standing relationship with," said Michelle Bernardin, a development manager at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

Such projects can also offer an artist a creative experience beyond the normal realm. One example is May Castleberry's program for [MoMA's](#) Library Council. Since 2001, Ms. Castleberry has produced about one limited-edition artist's book or single-page multiple a year. Each artist who is chosen is invited to explore the museum's library and archival collections, and to "think about the historic precedent," Ms. Castleberry said. Payment isn't lavish, she added: "They don't get to do the book of their dreams all the time."

Carolina Nitsch, a New York editions publisher and dealer who produces multiples for the New Museum and others, agreed that these commissions can be exhilarating. Artists become excited, she said, "when they understand that it's really something special, that it's a new piece that they couldn't do otherwise."

For an artist, a multiple can be a creative turning point. Richard Klein, the exhibitions director at the Aldrich, said it was often a case of using the museum's resources "to influence them into taking the first step into doing something different." His program has become so successful that he is commissioning about four new artworks a year. "On the curatorial side, we're looking at their work rather dispassionately and thinking, What sort of multiple would be good for this person to make?"

Mr. Klein pointed to Jane South, a sculptor who makes cantilevered wall installations using hand-cut and painted paper. "We thought about laser-cutting so she could create larger work," he said, "because it was becoming too elaborate and heavy to continue by hand." Ms. South, at his urging, dreamed up a stainless-steel relief that could be laser-cut and painted by an auto-body shop, activities he organized for under cost. "Jane was so excited by this," he said, "that she's pursuing some other laser-cut work with metal."

For many contemporary-art museums, an editions program seems the ultimate fulfillment of their mission: connecting new artists with new audiences. Witness the Whitney, which for its last two Biennials has produced catalogs that are miniature art objects themselves. "I think people enjoy having something that's unconventional," said Chrissie Iles, a Whitney curator who worked on both Biennial exhibitions.

The 2004 Biennial catalog included a box of posters, postcards, stickers, acetates and zines, all created by artists in the show. The catalog for the current show, which Ms. Iles curated with Mr. Vergne of the Walker, unfolds into 99 separate posters.

"We wanted the artists to have a greater participation in the book, because that's the spirit of the show in general," Ms. Iles said.