

“Through art, new ideas are revealed”

With art fair TEFAF taking place this month, gallery owner – and TEFAF board member – Hidde van Seggelen (42) enlightens us on this prestigious event and other art matters.

Interview *Minou op den Velde*
Photography *Maurits Giesen*

1 TEFAF Maastricht is a treasure for international collectors and museums. The price of a booth is €60,000. Do you feel any pressure?

Yes, a lot. Curators from international museums will be stopping by, and I need to make at least six months' worth of my annual revenue here. TEFAF truly is the event of the year. All throughout the year, I'll be planning what I'm going to show. This time, among other works, I will be bringing along paintings by Dutch artist Pieter Laurens Mol from the 1980s.

2 TEFAF is an 11-day event. How do you get through it?

It's exhausting! Seriously, I lost a lot of weight last year. Setting things up takes three days, and then there are two days of checking up on everything. Afterwards, there's the grand opening, an important social event. At that point, the actual fair hasn't even started yet. So, I'm constantly performing at a maximum level. I'm on my feet all day long, because I don't think it's polite to remain seated. I've got to stay

alert to see in which direction collectors are moving and where my colleagues are, because there is a lot of competition. I do not want to see a work by the same artist displayed at a colleague's booth. I'm also talking the whole day through; at the end of the day, my jaws hurt. After last year's fair, I was tired for a month and a half.

3 Are you from a family of art lovers?

Not at all. There were a few composers and philosophers in my mother's extended family, but my father was a company lawyer at DAF trucks in Eindhoven. He was not into art at all. I developed an interest in art because I started going to Eindhoven's Van Abbe Museum when I was a boy. Once I got my public transport card at 15, I started travelling all around the country to visit museums. On my own, because none of my friends were interested. I made my own sculptures as well, which I kept in the back of our garden. Sometimes, I would set one on fire and drape the ashes in a circle, as if they were part of an installation. My

father destroyed my sculptures, or he just threw them away. I was told that I would never be allowed to study art history or visit art school, because I would never make any money through art. I went on to study law, yet ended up graduating on the subject of Cultural Patronage. Today, my parents are very proud of me. My father even helps me with the booth at TEFAF. He builds dividers, or creates boxes for the lighting. He enjoys the fact that I know how to select items that are highly appreciated in the art world.

4 What does art mean to you?

Freedom and enrichment. New ideas are revealed through art. What really excites me is the moment I start wondering: "What exactly makes this good?" To find the answer, I'll establish a relationship with the artist. I want to get to the source of my fascination; discover the technical aspects, learn the story behind an artwork. That's my motive. Let me give you an example...
Siobhán Hapaska is one of the artists >



TEFAF in short

Every year, art fair TEFAF attracts thousands of visitors to the scenic city of Maastricht, in the south of the Netherlands. In 2015, 75,000 people travelled there; half of them came from outside the Netherlands. For years, Hidde van Seggelen had assisted gallery owner Ben Janssens, who was TEFAF's chairman. Last year, he became a board member in his own right. This year, the prestigious art fair takes place 11-20 March. And, as of 2016, TEFAF is expanding overseas, with two art fairs in New York: TEFAF New York Fall in October 2016 and TEFAF New York Spring in May 2017. tefaf.com, hiddevanseggelen.com

“There’s a reason why contemporary artists like Jeff Koons collect Old Masters”

I represent. Last year, she suspended nine olive trees on their sides in Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam. The trunks were strapped with ratchets and had small engines attached to them, resulting in a shaking forest. Hapaska questions how mankind deals with nature, and how technology influences who we are. The olive trees represented western civilisation, and during the exhibition, they shook their leaves off, which looked magnificent.

5 You live and work in London. What makes it such an attractive city?

In the 1980s, Cologne was one of the most prominent centres of contemporary art. Galleries and artists who did well in those days followed the money, and galleries started to open in New York City. There, galleries can easily make a living by selling to collectors who live downtown. In recent years, they all opened giant branches in London, as art has gone global. What makes London so interesting is that the whole city is about transactions and houses lots of big companies. A collector might be in London for a few days, and will visit us in between meetings to buy a painting that will end up in their house in the Hamptons, the luxurious seaside resort near New York City. My colleague Sadie Coles now runs half a soccer field of gallery space in Regent Street.

Meanwhile, I'm considering moving to Germany. I miss a focus on contents, because London is all about real estate prices and investments. And, for small

players like me, this city has become too expensive. Because of that, some of the best artists are moving away as well.

6 Last year, you introduced the special curated section showing modern sculptures at TEFAF. Why do you want to show contemporary art?

People who sell contemporary art often say: “TEFAF? What’s that?” It doesn’t have any sex appeal, and yet it’s the most important art fair in the world. People think it’s simply where you come to see excellent French furniture, early South American sculpture, or antique jewellery. The contemporary section really needs modernisation. I think it’s interesting to exhibit good contemporary art at TEFAF, because it allows us to create tension between the new and fresh versus the old and magnificent. During TEFAF’s 29 years of existence, fascinating careers have bloomed, but those contemporary artists were never represented at the fair. I’m talking about talent such as Cristina Iglesias, Markus Raetz and Richard Deacon, to name but a few.

This year, TEFAF’s curated section is called *Show Your Wound*, which is derived from the installation *Zeige Dein Wunde* (1974-’75) by German sculptor, painter, graphic and performance artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986). Together with curator/writer Mark Kremer, we’ve asked seven artists and gallery owners to show art that fits in with Beuys’ creations, because we suspect he has greatly influenced many contemporary artists with his diverse and daring work.

7 And the annual branch organisation report has concluded that art from the postwar era generates almost half of all sales...

Absolutely. The market follows collectors and museums, and their focus is on contemporary art. It’s incomprehensible that a 16th-century Pietà is sold for €220,000 while one of modern British painter Glenn Brown’s works is priced at €1.2 million. That tension between the old and the new is very much alive within the confines of the fair. The market share of contemporary and modern art is much larger than that of the old masters, because it’s susceptible to speculation and hype. But classic art represents a fixed market value; there’s a reason why contemporary artists like Jeff Koons collect Old Masters.

8 How do you build a relationship with clients?

I don’t run a flashy business, and I want to establish personal relationships with my clients. I dealt with a Saudi prince once, but I only got to speak to his butler; that’s not how I like to work.

I always think about what my clients could find exciting, because not a single collector is the same. [Laughs] It is a running joke between my wife and me; anything is permitted between a client and me as long as I get paid. Which is not always easy. Within a week of my youngest child being born, I had to visit a client in Belgium. That wasn’t very nice for my wife. But it’s all in a day’s work, I guess. ■