

Katya Kazakina, "How Harper Levine Became an Under-the-Radar Art World Powerhouse," *Town & Country*, April 2, 2022

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How Harper Levine Became an Under-the-Radar Art World Powerhouse

The former rare bookseller now runs a mini-empire of six galleries, from Los Angeles to East Hampton.

BY KATYA KAZAKINA | APR 2, 2022



Photo: Charlie Rubin

Harper Levine never expected this. Now 54, he has spent most of his professional life as a rare book seller, building a business in St. Paul, Minnesota, and, since 2010, the Hamptons. Over the years artists such as Richard Prince and Eddie Martinez would come in to get advice on building their libraries or to buy books on obscure Japanese photography or Beat literature. Some became his friends.

It was at their urging that Levine began staging exhibitions at Harper's Books, in East Hampton. In 2014, when an artist canceled, he texted Prince, asking for suggestions to fill the spot. "Figgis," came the reply. Prince had recently discovered Genieve Figgis on Twitter and fallen for her feathery, macabre paintings. Levine took Prince's advice, and the show sold out. "That was when I started to really think that a career as a gallerist was possible," Levine says.

In March, Harper's Gallery opened a 4,000-square-foot location on West 22nd Street in Manhattan, on the same block as heavyweights like Hauser & Wirth. It's Levine's sixth branch—his footprint has tripled over the past two years—and he now has outposts in East Hampton, Manhattan, and Los Angeles. He represents 16 artists and employs 12 people. "I had a vision," Levine says. "I decided that what I wanted to do with the rest of my life was to operate a bigger gallery."

Many are surprised by Levine's ascent, and Levine shares the sentiment. A New York City native, he wanted to be a writer, but he dropped out of an MFA program at St. Paul's Hamline University in 2001 and went into bookselling. "All the years prior, the time as a book dealer and a writer, was just leading up to this conclusion that I was meant to be a gallerist," Levine says.

In 2016 he opened Harper's Apartment, a pied-à-terre turned exhibition space on East 74th Street, his first foothold in New York. It was a domestic affair, with shows of emerging artists like Jennifer Guidi and Joel Mesler, and after openings Levine would occasionally sleep on the pullout sofa. Today his operation is larger, but its low-key vibe still attracts artists and collectors. "People are excited about his program," says art adviser Benjamin Godsill, who has bought works from the gallery. "It feels very of the moment."

Levine has also had the good fortune of riding the contemporary art market's wave. Take Figgis, whose jewel-toned rococo ghouls inspired the 2019 spring collection by Marc Jacobs. As her audience expanded, her paintings ignited bidding wars at auction, selling for as much as \$638,692, a far cry from her 2014 solo debut at Harper's, where prices started at \$6,000. "Harper's a guy who's always looking forward," says Marcus Brutus, the painter whose work opened the new gallery. (In May Harper's two Chelsea spaces will show work by the late abstract painter Young-II Ahn.)



Marcus Brutus's painting "Horse Jumper," part of the opening exhibition at Harper's Gallery's new Manhattan outpost.



Artists want to show with Levine, Godsill says, because they feel that he understands them. Even though his gallery is young, Levine has spent decades looking and thinking about art from a different point of view than many of the field's top players. "He's a special art dealer," Godsill says. "A quiet, gentle, and evolved soul." Evidently, nice guys don't have to finish last.

Marcus Brutus's "Dolphin Dance," on view at Harper's Gallery. Other artists Levine has shown include Genieve Figgis, Jennifer Guidi, and Joel Mesler.