AVENUE

Don't Call Them "It" Girls
By Ben Diamond
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Maria Baibakova is busy. "I only budgeted a half hour for this call," she says, speaking over the phone from London.

As the founder of Baibakov Art Projects, a nonprofit dedicated to bringing Western art to Russia, the Moscow-born 32-year-old has played an important role in establishing her native country as one of the new centers of the art world. Baibakova is also the founder and chair of the Artemis Council, a group at the New Museum that supports exhibitions, commissions and residencies by woman artists. In the two years since its founding, the Council has helped stage a number of acclaimed exhibitions, among them retrospectives of the artists Pipilotti Rist and Carol Rama, as well as a new survey, "Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon."

Add to that roles as an art consultant, a sometimes curator, a prominent collector, and a trustee at Barnard College, where she's endowed a scholarship for art history, and you can see why Baibakova might not have a lot of time.

Tiffany Zabludowicz, 25, has an equally packed schedule. The daughter of two prominent British art collectors—in 2007, they opened a gallery in London dedicated to their holdings—Zabludowicz has fast become a renowned collector in her own right. She's also member of a number of groups, among them the Guggenheim's Young Collector Council and the Artemis Council, and an accomplished curator, most recently of a show of women's sculpture that opened earlier this month in Times Square.

In today's art world, women like Baibakova and Zabludowicz—independent self-starters, the kind of women who chair their own foundations and curate exhibitions in their own galleries—aren't hard to come by. But what's particularly notable is how often their determination is paired with an equally

strong desire to support other women and their projects. Speak to nearly any woman in the art world today, and what emerges is her deep reverence for her peers.

Once upon a time, these women would have been called “it” girls. Their youth, their beauty, their social connections—these are the attributes that would have defined them, their careers reduced to status-granting sinecures. But fortunately, those days are gone. The women of today’s art world are talented, hardworking innovators motivated by a lot more than party invitations.

That’s not to say that they don’t have social lives. Just look at Bettina Prentice, 37, the founder and creative director of Prentice Cultural, a consulting agency that represents nonprofits like the Art Production Fund, Pioneer Works and the Museum of Arts and Design. Parties are a big part of Prentice’s life—galas are one of the best ways for nonprofits to support themselves. Prentice is particularly proud of one she organized recently where she re-created the Stork Club, even replicating the long-gone nightclub’s tabletops and ashtrays.

Supporting artists is an equally important part of Prentice’s job. She helps connect struggling artists with art-supporting brands like Tiffany and, through her work with the Arts Production Fund, helps publicize works like Ugo Rondinone’s sculpture *Seven Magic Mountains* in the Nevada desert. Through it all, Prentice remains enthralled by the sublime, transformative power of art. The sentiment is as strong now as when she first decided to make it her career. “I went to Georgetown with the intention of majoring in theology, until I took an art history class on Edvard Munch,” she says. “I had a very spiritual experience communing with the work, and I shifted gears almost immediately.”

The parties that Prentice helps organize are an important place for new art to be seen. “The social aspects of the art world are productive,” says Tiffany Zabludowicz. “I love going to an opening where I can support art or celebrate a young artist.”

One of the most promising of those young artists is Sarah Meyohas, 26. Meyohas makes heady, maximalist conceptual art that betrays her academic background. She has three degrees—a B.S. in economics from Wharton, a B.A. in international relations from Penn and an M.F.A. from Yale. Some of her previous works include *Bitchcoin*, a cryptocurrency pegged to the value of her art, and *Stock Performance*, a performance piece where she drew share price fluctuations in real time.

Her latest piece, *Cloud of Petals*, now on view at Red Bull Arts in Chelsea, documents a yearlong project in which 16 men at the abandoned Bell Works in Holmdel, New Jersey, digitally cataloged 100,000 plucked rose petals. The installation at Red Bull features 3,289 of the rose petals arranged on the exhibition's walls; an enigmatic, beautifully photographed film of the data entry process; and a VR headset of falling CGI rose petals generated from the data set created in Holmdel. "I'd never done something like this," Meyohas says. "I didn't tell that many people about it, I wasn't doing it for an audience—I was doing it for myself. It was a weird, almost selfish thing."

But for all her modesty, Meyohas is fully dedicated to supporting her peers. In addition to her art, she runs a gallery, Meyohas, which was first located in her apartment and is now in her studio. The space is dedicated to showcasing the work of friends and classmates. "It's fun because there's no motivation to sell anything. It was being done out of where I lived so I wasn't paying an outside space for it. It allowed the work to be a lot more creative and free. Not like at a museum, where you have to plan things a million years in advance," she says.

Of course, museum exhibitions don't have to be stuffy. Laura Phipps, 36, and Jennie Goldstein, 36, two curators at the Whitney, are coming to art from a new perspective. Phipps is from Tulsa; Goldstein, North Carolina. Growing up so far outside the art world's red-hot center was challenging. "It makes you feel like an oddity, I guess," says Goldstein, while Phipps jokes that she knew more about the art world before she moved to New York from the sheer effort required to keep up.

Both became interested in art during college. Phipps had intended to be a visual artist like her mother, but came to love museum work from an internship at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. Goldstein got into art from dance, and from exploring the intermedia movements of the '60s, when artists, dancers and musicians all collaborated. "It's fascinating to do something scholarly and in-depth that also connects with really broad audiences," Goldstein says.

Today, the two are rising stars at the museum—Phipps helped organize "Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World," a coproduction with the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles that went on view on November 3, and Goldstein was one of the curators on "An Incomplete History of Protest: Selections from the Whitney's Collection, 1940–2017," which opened to raves in August. Both shows deal with

artists and subjects that aren't normally given space in museums—Durham's work is heavily informed by his Native American heritage, while the "Protest" exhibition deals with political movements agitating against the status quo. "Art is a way to making visible and expressing marginalized voices. As an institution, we feel that we have a responsibility to allow those voices to be heard," says Phipps.

The artist Zoë Buckman, 32, is one of those voices. Buckman was introduced to art and culture by her mother, a teacher at London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, but the decision to become an artist was one she made on her own. "I've made things with my hands since I was young," she said. "That was how I'd express my creativity. Like most kids, I'd make things for my parents and leave them on their bed. But my artistic practice wasn't my body. I didn't sing, I didn't dance and I didn't act. I didn't demonstrate any talent in those things or much interest." Yet textiles and photography classes convinced Buckman that she had a future in making art.

Today, Buckman is acclaimed for her uncompromisingly feminist art. Her most famous, piece, *Champ*, part of a series called "Mostly, It's Just Uncomfortable," features a neon-light uterus with boxing gloves in place of the ovaries. Growing up with two brothers, Buckman had a childhood defined by more traditionally masculine activities, and the contradiction inherent in that is an important motivator for her work. "I find myself drawn to testosterone-heavy arenas, like the boxing gym or the basketball court. In my work, I try to use materials that embody that divide." It's a strong, timely vision of female empowerment, one that will seem even timelier when it appears next year in a 43-foot high incarnation on L.A.'s Sunset Strip.

Women enter the art world from more traditionally feminine places, too. Anne Huntington, 33, developed a lifelong passion for collecting by hoarding Precious Moments figurines and American Girl dolls as a child. Today, her tastes have shifted toward more mature, complicated stuff, like work by the politically outspoken artist Josephine Meckseper. Huntington is concerned with more than mere aesthetics. "That's the neat part about collecting," she says. "An acquisition isn't just another artwork, it's a symbol of my belief in the artist's practice." Through her involvement with young collectors' councils, she's been able to push New York museums to embrace her vision of art. "I am inspired by impact and

these institutions directly impact their communities. It's incredible to be able to effect change, continue to learn and discover by getting involved."

Involvement can take many different forms. As the third generation in a storied art-dealing family, Isabelle Bscher, 30, the head of America and special projects at Zurich's Galerie Gmurzynska, had a less radical path to a career in art. Bscher's grandmother founded Galerie Gmurzynska in Cologne in 1965, and it soon became known for selling works by Russian avant-gardists like Kazimir Malevich and Alexander Rodchenko. When Bscher's grandmother died, her mother took over, overseeing the gallery's relocation to Zurich.

Bscher is inspired by the power of strong women. The image of her grandmother fleeing communist Poland for Germany and starting a gallery in a strange new country is one that's stuck with her. "You need to be able to do many things well to be a gallerist," she says. "You need to be nurturing with artists, social with collectors, focused in your research and creative in your shows. It takes a female brain to do all that."

Today, Bscher hopes to be able to help to take her family's gallery to new heights with a long-overdue entrance into the American market. "I've found a space that I like very much on the Upper East Side," she says, although superstition doesn't allow her to elaborate.

There's a reason that all these women believe so strongly in supporting other women. "There is still a serious level of gender disparity in the art world," Baibakova says. "During 2016, female artists only got about 20 percent of all solo shows. Women born after 1965 hover around 25 percent of the makeup of art collections, and women born before 1965 are at about 15 percent. Only 30 percent of the artists represented by galleries in the U.K. and the U.S. are women. And on the dealer side, although there may be some very prominent female dealers, the art world still feels like a boys club."

It's an inequality that's been hard to correct. "There are lots of women curators," says Jennie Goldstein, "but men continue to primarily have the positions of greatest power in the art world. When it comes to leadership roles, they still tend to dominate. There are examples of women in those roles, but that difference is still there."

As long as men continue to be in those positions, advancing women beyond token status will be a challenge. "White men continue to be the richest

demographic in our society," Buckman said. "They are going to continue to buy work made by artists who are telling their stories and with whom they have an affinity."

But the miniature ecosystem that these women are modeling—female collectors buying from female gallerists, female curators showcasing works by female artists—is a heartening development. While power may still be primarily held by men, there are more powerful women than ever.

"The planes are equaling," Zabludowicz says. "Women still get paid less for their art, they still get less exhibitions, but it's beginning to even out. You can't define all art by gender, but I think there are strong female voices at the moment that are finally being given more of a platform. There's still a lot of work to be done, but it's a wonderful development to see."

"And, of course," she adds, "girls gotta support girls."