

Artnet News Pro

The Art Detective

What Makes the Property-Brokering, Painting-Hoovering Art King of Tribeca so Unusual? He's a Genuinely Good Guy

At the intersection of art and real estate, you expect a cut-throat wheeler-dealer. Not this time.

Katya Kazakina, March 24, 2023



Jonathan Travis. Photo: Katya Kazakina.

Jonathan Travis is a budding mogul at the intersection of two notoriously cut-throat, shady industries: contemporary art and New York real estate. As an investigative journalist who has covered both fields extensively, I expected to encounter a certain type of man when I began hearing about his exploits—think tax machinations, rampant flipping, art bartering—and sharpened my pencil.

Imagine my disappointment when I discovered the awful truth: he's a nice guy. Really. Sorry.

First, some backstory. Travis has been a gallery whisperer for the past decade—and he's only 36 years old. He's the visionary who helped transform Tribeca into New York's new art-world mecca, where some 50 dealerships are packed tightly within five blocks below Canal Street, making it the city's biggest art district after Chelsea. Dealers who've worked with him uniformly described him as "genuine" and "trusted." Even among his real estate competitors, the worst they could say is that he's too perfect (good hair, gorgeous girlfriend, adorable pooch, extensive art collection, and an Instagram account documenting it all).

The commercial real estate broker is personally responsible for onboarding at least half of Tribeca's gallery population, including Andrew Kreps, Bortolami, James Cohan, and Canada. In the past month alone, he locked in spaces for dealers Alexander Gray, Nino Mier, and Lio Malca.

But the biggest feather in his cap, by far, is persuading the esteemed Marian Goodman Gallery to take a long-term lease on a 30,000-square-foot, five-story building (not counting a basement and rooftop) on Broadway, where the annual rent is just shy of \$2 million. The first blue-chip gallery to establish its headquarters in Tribeca, it was just the kind of an anchor the area needed to solidify its growing reputation.



Jonathan Travis in front to 385 Broadway in Tribeca, the future home of Marian Goodman Gallery. Photo: Katya Kazakina.

“Everyone who knows him says the same thing: He’s a good guy,” said Malca, the latest dealer to rent a ground floor in Tribeca thanks to Travis. “He’s a straight shooter. He loves art. He is sincere and hard working. I see him at gallery dinners. I see him at openings. No one knows the area as well as he does.”

That this all sounded too good to be true—and, believe me, covering the art market for as long as I have can make you cynical—was front of mind when I headed downtown on a snowy night last month to the New York Academy of Art for a dinner celebrating its winter exhibition “Eye to Eye.” Travis curated the show, selecting works by student artists, who, in turn, chose paintings from Travis’s collection. The event was attended by the likes of Alexander Gilkes—art investor, auctioneer, and Maria Sharapova’s baby daddy—and Metropolitan Museum of Art curator Ian Alteveer. Travis, sporting a fuzzy, color-block sweater and a perfectly groomed beard, gave a brief speech about his passion for art.

I had questions. How does someone this young amass 300 artworks, many by today's hottest emerging artists such as Emily Mae Smith and Julie Curtiss? Were they kickbacks from his gallery clients? And what about that Wolf Hill Arts residency he founded during the pandemic in a six-bedroom house in Westchester, where he now lives? Is it a tax write-off? Is he a flipper? Beyond that, what's in the cards for the Tribeca art district? What's the next frontier he plans to monetize?

Travis eagerly agreed to meet up the next morning for coffee, suggesting La Colombe on the corner of Church and Lispenard Streets, the northwestern corner of his kingdom that encompasses five blocks to Leonard Street and from West Broadway to Cortlandt Alley. I downed my double-espresso and looked north, where you could almost make out SoHo's cobblestone streets.



Installation view, "Fernanda Laguna, Welcome to my show in New York!!!!!! Bienvenidos a mi muestra en Nueva York!!!!!!" at Bortolami, The Upstairs, New York, NY, 2022.

The past three years have been a blur in Tribeca, with the number of galleries more than doubling in the area. Travis's 'aha moment' came the day when Canada, James Cohan, and Andrew Kreps all had their inaugural openings in September 2019.

"It felt like a block party almost," Travis said. "And the difference between that energy and Chelsea's energy was palpable. It felt mellower. It felt younger. It felt more relaxed. People were drinking and smoking weed in the streets. That was the first moment where I was like, 'Oh shit. Something cool is happening here.'"

It was long coming. In 2013, Travis was a rookie broker with just one year in the field when he spotted an article about struggling Chelsea midsize galleries. It quoted art dealer Casey Kaplan, whose lease was coming up. Travis contacted Kaplan and found him a bigger, less expensive space in the Flower District. The dealer then introduced Travis to Anton Kern and he got him a 24-year lease on East 55th Street. Next came Alexander and Bonin and Bortolami, who both moved to Tribeca. The rest is history.

“Now it’s all self-evident,” said Andrew Kreps. “He was really able to sell, early on, galleries on moving here. He had relationships with landlords. He knew places on the market, places that could be on the market. He genuinely cares about art and art world.”

Travis often gets a whiff of available storefronts before they are officially listed by walking the streets and cold-calling landlords. Some deals may take a couple of months, others years to come to fruition. Often it’s a mix of luck and shoe-leather.

(Galleries pay on average around \$20,000 to \$23,000 a month for a standard 4,000-5,000-square-foot ground-floor space that often includes a free—and insurable—basement of the same size that can be used for exhibitions, storage, or offices.)



Installation view, “Firelei Báez, Americananana” at James Cohan, 48 Walker Street.

Marian Goodman is a case in point. Travis knew the landlord of 385 Broadway from being in the neighborhood. During the pandemic, the previous tenant, a co-working company, lost its funding and had to vacate the premises as a result of litigation, Travis said. The landlord promised that Travis would be his first phone call when he was able to rent it again. He kept his word.

Meanwhile, the gallery was looking for a new space as its midtown home since the 1980s became endangered by a nearby highrise construction. An appraiser mentioned this to Travis, reconnecting him with the gallery. In the end, the gallery signed a 10-year lease at a relative bargain price of \$60 per square foot, compared with the current range of \$95 to \$120 per square foot for ground floor, Travis said, explaining that rent is cheaper on upper floors and the gallery will only have 5,000 feet on the ground. The landlord is additionally throwing in 14 months of free rent. (Typically, a 10-year lease would get you six to eight months of free rent.)

Perhaps naturally for someone spending so much time in gallery settings, talking to dozens of art dealers on a regular basis, Travis caught the art bug—and began acquiring paintings at a rapid clip. His collection has about 300 works, mostly figurative. He keeps about half of his trove in his house in Chappaqua, New York; more than one hundred works sit in storage, and the rest are with his parents.

Travis pointed out that he gets paid by landlords, not galleries, and he doesn't have to barter for art.

"I go to clients, and I'm like, 'Hey, let me help you find a space. And you don't have to pay me,'" he said. "It's an easy value proposition."

Altogether, it's an approach that, unsurprisingly, makes him friends in the gallery sphere. "He comes across as the least likely real estate broker you ever met," said James Cohan. "He's genuinely interested in art and has collected extensively. He has our best interests."



Installation view, "Hadi Falapishi, Almost Perfect" at Andrew Kreps Gallery, 22 Cortlandt Alley, New York. Photo: Lance Brewer.

Travis bought the house in Westchester during the pandemic as an investment with a friend, Ethan Rafii, in part to use it as a platform to showcase art.

"It's a big old space," he said. "I was so entrenched in the art world at that point that I wanted to come up with more ways to utilize my relationships and my network to support young artists."

The residency itself is located 36 miles south, in Long Island City. It's a studio an artist gets to use for three to four months. The resulting works are shown at the upstate house, Travis said, where he tries to sell them and connect the artists to galleries and collectors. He splits the proceeds 50/50 with the artists, uses some of

the funds to cover the costs and the rest to donate to the charities of the artist's choice, he said.

In the beginning of the pandemic, when his business stopped for three months, Travis turned to his collection, selling works by coveted young artists like Curtiss and Smith "to get through," he said. "I don't have a salary, so if my deal flow stops, my income stops."

He now spends hours looking through PDFs, going to see shows, sending emails to dealers, and talking to artists—with the same obsessive intensity as he looks for available spaces in Tribeca.

It's a blessing and a curse. "If you ask my girlfriend," Travis said, "I get very wrapped up in what I am doing. I can tune out others."

Same goes for his newer hobby: curating. Last week, 1969 Gallery opened a show called "Who Is Your Master?" curated by Travis and Rafii, co-founders of Wolf Hill. It included 14 international artists, exploring the cultural traditions and individuals who have shaped their journeys. The opening was mobbed, judging by the photos Travis posted on Instagram.

The duo worked hard on the show—"25/8" is how Quang Bao, the gallery owner, described their approach from the get-go. "I wonder sometimes if they really have full time jobs."

"It's not a real estate broker curating a show," Bao added. "This is a collector with a nonprofit trying to introduce 14 international artists to the world."

That doesn't sound like a cutthroat real estate schemer, price manipulator, art speculator, or any other fascinating art villain. It sounds, sigh, like a really nice guy.

Follow [Artnet News](#) on Facebook: