

Programming in Flux: A Conversation With Skarlet Smatana of the George Economou Collection

SCOTT INDRISEK | JULY 02, 2015



Skarlet Smatana
(Photo by Yannis Kontos)

Skarlet Smatana is the director of the [George Economou Collection](http://www.thegeorgeeconomoucollection.com/) (<http://www.thegeorgeeconomoucollection.com/>), a private Athens-based institution, helmed by the eponymous Greek shipping magnate, that stages twice-yearly public exhibitions in the city. Smatana is not Greek herself — she was born in Europe, raised in Canada, and spent time in Venice, Chicago, and New York, working at Pace and L&M Arts, among other places. I spoke with her at the opening of the collection's current exhibition, an inventive pairing of works by Georg Baselitz and Paul McCarthy titled "[In Between](http://www.thegeorgeeconomoucollection.com/exhibitions/inbetween)" (<http://www.thegeorgeeconomoucollection.com/exhibitions/inbetween>)" (on view through October 5). We discussed Economou's collecting philosophy, as well as the importance of private cultural institutions in Greece's chaotic socio-economic climate.

How did you meet George Economou?

I met George as a client of L&M and knew him for about a year before we started on this idea. At the time he had a Greek adviser who was not educated in the field. It wasn't as pragmatic as it is now. He's an extremely busy person, running many different companies. He hoped one day he could have someone [in charge of the collection] to provide more direction and a clear purpose.

What's the job like?

I travel seven or eight months of the year with George. I'm basically in flight, though now I do have an address in London. We might go meet a collector in Germany or Switzerland or a curator at LACMA. I do a lot of work with museums and curators. We're trustees of both the Tate and DIA.

How much does the collection grow every year?

It fluctuates. We collect less by quantity, more by quality, which can make things expensive. But maybe 15 to 18 pieces a year. We'll only collect midcareer artists, and then historical work.

So no 24-year-old painters.

Alexandra, George's daughter, has her own collection, and her own interests in her generation, specifically. The best thing you can do is collect within your own generation. But George started a little bit late. He was born in 1953; he's 62. Because he started late, we had to go back a little bit. He also has a strong passion for early 20th-century German art, so that historical part of the collection is very active. It's just slower, because the majority of the pieces are already claimed by institutions or locked in families.

Where does that particular interest come from?

George studied at MIT. The Fogg Museum had a great New Objectivity and German Expressionism show. It was the expressiveness of the figures, their faces, that will to survive, that he appreciated. George is self-made. This idea of the human will to regenerate — I think it's within him, culturally.

What about your own area of specialization?

My Renaissance and Flemish art are very strong. But in grad school I focused on postwar German, and American too. My thesis was on Gerhard Richter and German history, which was quite controversial at the time. This was between 2002 and 2004. The conversation about Germany and its art in the postwar period hadn't happened; Robert Storr was starting, with Richter. The MCA in Chicago had done a Richter show in the 1980s, but it didn't combine the art with an understanding of how Richter came out of the dynamic of World War II and the influence of America.

In terms of the collection's German holdings, you organized a show, at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg

(<http://www.thegeorgeeconomoucollection.com/exhibitions/gegenlicht-german-art-from-the-george-economou-collection>), **of German art from the early 20th century through the postwar period.**

That was the first time German art of that period was ever shown in Russia. We had thousands of people come; we were on the news. It meant a lot to us because of how it affected people.

How is your role with the collection different from your previous work at private galleries?

I'm an advocate of fairness. In the gallery role, I was very much in the middle: I wanted both sides to benefit, the client and the gallery. I got in trouble constantly! Let's remember — art is something to be enjoyed, right? You should allow it to be beautiful and free, to thrive. You suffocate it otherwise. And the collectors who do this, it's not their primary vocation. They do it as a pleasure. What is quite different is that I constantly have George's point of view, or his lens, in mind when we move the collection forward, keeping it on track. Because collectors, by definition, collect. If it were possible, they would do everything, but it's not. You can't have everything in the world.

How did you come up with the combination of Georg Baselitz and Paul McCarthy for this show?

I was at the Hermitage exhibition with George, and we started talking about Baselitz, who is someone we collect in depth. And then we talked about McCarthy. After, in the car, I thought, "This is so obvious, to pair them together." Combining the two of them historically started to make sense, even though they were geographically separated. I spoke to our curators, Paul Schimmel and Carla Schulz-Hoffmann, and they were surprised but then said, "This is good. It's obvious and not obvious." Hans-Ulrich Obrist said the same thing: "Why didn't I think of that? It's so clear." There's so much we can learn when we do these combinations. If we pair Isa Genzken with Dan Flavin, what happens? That's something Mark Godfrey will do in October — we're having a Minimalism show and on the second floor he's pairing a 1960s Flavin with a Genzken ellipsoid piece, the first she ever made. They both have this spearing motion. He'll have Agnes Martin but also Roni Horn and Robert Gober.

The beauty is that we can do things here in the space and be very free and open, because there's a patron — George. So Mark, for example, is free to open up the idea of Minimalism and what that word means today, and what it meant in the past, to deconstruct it. We're having these conversations with the artists and curators, and taking the opportunity to present it in a sharply focused way, to use it as a springboard: Here's an idea, we took it as far as we could. If anyone wants to pick it up, here it is.

What else is on the horizon?

In the fall of 2016, we'll do a Gutai, Arte Povera, and Zero exhibition: Japan, Italy, and Germany in the 1950s and '60s. Those movements we collect in depth.

Is the collection engaged with other institutions internationally?

Yes, obviously, because of the DIA relationship in the U.S. and the Tate in London. We also have a lending program in place. We lent to the “Zero” exhibition at the Guggenheim, the Guber exhibition at MoMA. We have a Simon Denny installation piece at MoMA PS1. There’s a Jean-Michel Basquiat show opening at the Guggenheim in Bilbao, and we’ve lent to that.

What about local relationships?

In terms of Greece, the Ministry of Culture here is in flux. I think that’s clear. It’s hard to place yourself in something that’s in movement. It’s a difficult situation. One thing we can count on is being an independent entity that is stable. Audiences in Greece really count on these private cultural mainstays, including Dimitris Daskalopoulos [[NEON](http://neon.org.gr/en/) (<http://neon.org.gr/en/>)] and Dakkis Joannou [[Deste Foundation](http://deste.gr/) (<http://deste.gr/>)]. We do all that we can.

“In Between,” a two-person show spotlighting the work of Georg Baselitz and Paul McCarthy, is on view at the George Economou Collection through October 5.