

A New and Giant Player Looms in Web Art Sales

By RANDY KENNEDY

The selling of expensive contemporary art online has had a rocky history. Sotheby's and the art-innovation company ArtNet both tried and failed as pioneers in the late 1990s, giving up after deciding buyers were not yet ready to pay five or six figures for works they had not seen in person. The VIP Art Fair had slightly better luck when it began in 2011, though it was plagued by technical problems that showed how tricky it was to transplant the experience of bricks-and-mortar selling into a virtual environment.

But the landscape is shifting rapidly, and it is about to be tilted by the entry of a heavyweight: Amazon is in discussions with

Amazon is poised to re-enter a market that is edging into six-figure prices.

dozens of smaller established galleries to begin offering contemporary and other fine art, moving well beyond the posters and inexpensive prints it now offers.

The expected decision would represent Amazon's re-entry into the art world, after it also made an early unsuccessful try as partner to Sotheby's, in 1999. It would join several well-established players in the online market, like Artzy, a high-end seller that uses a Pandora-like algorithm search feature; Paddle8, an online auction site; ArtNet, which is back in the business with auctions; and Artspace, which has partnerships with dozens of prestigious galleries and museums offering works from \$100 prints to a \$2.5 million Cy Twombly painting.

A spokesman for Amazon said in an e-mail that the company had no comment about plans for an art venture, first reported by The Art Newspaper. But several of the galleries in discussion with Amazon have said that the sales might begin this month and several told The Wall Street Jour-

nal that Amazon would charge its seller a commission of 5 percent to 20 percent.

It is unclear whether the company will focus on lower-end sales of prints and photographs or try to move into the market for higher priced one-of-a-kind works like paintings and sculpture. The growth of online sales has been fueled primarily by two factors: a broadening base of art collectors around the world; a much greater willingness by those people, both veteran collectors and newcomers, to trust online transactions and buy works after seeing only pictures of them; and a huge amount of inventory in the storerooms of galleries, a growing number of art fairs and other exhibitions leads to more artists making over more work.

A survey of more than 200 collectors by the international insurance company Hiscox, released in April, found that almost two-thirds had bought art online, without first seeing it in person, and that one-quarter of the collectors surveyed had spent \$75,000 or more on works from online sellers or those they had seen only in JPEGs sent by galleries.

"We've seen that the price point people are willing to pay is rising," said Catherine Levens, a co-founder and the chief executive of Artspace, which began selling art online in 2011. The company does not disclose overall sales figures but says that more than 200,000 people are now registered as members. Artspace is pushing past the \$100,000 mark have been showing up increasingly on the site, which charges a commission from galleries like Sotheby's and Christie's in New York and Sadie Coles in London. Artspace has sold pieces like an engraved graphic by Jenny Holzer for \$125,000.

"That doesn't happen every day, but for sure it's happening more and more," said Ms. Levens, who added that she believes the share of the overall contemporary market moving to online sales will increase steadily in the next few years. She added, "I think that Amazon getting into the business just makes that more clear."

In her first two novels, "Purple Hibiscus" and "Half of a Yellow Sun," the award-winning Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explored the history and contemporary life of her home country. Her new novel, "Americanah," is set in both Africa and the United States. The story follows Ifemela, a young Nigerian woman who moves to America and finds some of her most candid blog about issues of race and nationality. In a recent e-mail interview with John Williams, Ms. Adichie discussed the state of American fiction, her approach to writing about race and more. These are excerpts from the conversation.

Q. One character in "Americanah" says the African black American authors write about race, they "have to make sure it's so lyrical and subtle that the reader who doesn't read between the lines won't get what we're all about." Would you say that your book is in some ways a response to this?

A. The character was talking about African-American writers, not African or American-American writers, and this distinction is also partly what the novel is about. I think "Americanah" is a response of sorts but it is complicated by my not being African-American. I could have done "Americanah" differently, in a way that was safer. I know the tropes. I know how race is supposed to be dealt with in fiction (you can do a "novel of ideas" about baseball, but not about race, because it becomes "lecturing"), but I wanted to write the kind of novel about race that I wanted to read.

Still, there is a certain privilege in my position as somebody who is not an American, who is looking in from the outside. When I came to the U.S., I became fascinated by the many permutations of race, especially of blackness, the identity I was assigned in America. I still am fascinated.

Q. Did you feel you had to live in the United States a certain amount of time before you approached it in fiction?

A. I don't believe in writing what I don't know. So I feel, having lived in the U.S. off and on for a number of years, that I can tell a story about it. America, that said, the setting of my fiction isn't



The author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who uses race and identity as themes in her work.

a primary consideration for me. Character and story come first.

Q. Ifemela, one of the two main characters in "Americanah," is, like you, a Nigerian-born writer who moves to the United States and eventually receives a fellowship at Princeton. Aside from those details, is there a deeper autobiographical connection you feel with her?

A. Ifemela spends 13 years in the U.S. before moving back to Nigeria. I spent only four years in the U.S. before I went back, and have since lived in both countries. That is a significant difference, as much of Ifemela's character is shaped by being disconnected from home for so long. I quite like that she is a female character who is not safe and easily likeable, who is both strong and weak, both prickly and vulnerable.

Q. Okonko, the other main character, thinks that in contemporary American novels, "nothing was grave, nothing serious, nothing urgent, and most showed no ironic self-awareness." Is this an opinion you shared?

A. I'm reading new novels by Elizabeth Strout, Elliott Holt and Claire Messud, and they dispute Okonko's opinion. I do think there is a tendency in American fiction to celebrate what is fundamentally kept people comfortable.

Q. Do you see any differences in how your work is reviewed in the United States and Nigeria?

A. I'm very pleased that more

The U.S. has been at war for many years now, and there is also an ongoing intense ideological war in the U.S., but you would hardly know that from American literature. But of course this is also about my own biases. I love fiction that has something to say and doesn't "hide behind art," novels that feel true, that are not self-conscious experiments. I read a lot of contemporary American fiction and find the writing admirable, but often it is about individuals caged in their individuality. It says nothing about American life, it is more about style than it is about substance. Style matters, but I struggle to finish a novel that is all style and has nothing to say. "The Great Gatsby" for example, says something about American life in a way that many contemporary novels no longer do.

Q. In Nigeria you studied medicine. When and why did you decide to make writing your career?

A. Writing has always been what I loved and wanted to do. But I didn't think I could earn a living from writing. So I planned to be a psychiatrist, have a regular salary and use my patients' stories for my fiction. But then I left medical school because I was bored and thought I would get a job in media to earn a living. Now I am doing what I love and carrying a living from it, and I feel ridiculously lucky.

Q. Do you see any differences in how your work is reviewed in the United States and Nigeria?

A. I'm very pleased that more

Americans than I thought are reading it in a way I hoped it would be read. Still, it seems to me mostly American readers who most miss the fact that "Americanah" is supposed to be funny. I laughed a lot when writing it (although it is a bit worrying to be so amused by one's own humor). But I suppose race when bluntly dealt with does not blend well with that wonderful, famed American earnestness.

Q. What do you think it's important to instill in young writers?

A. This is what I tell my students: Read widely, read what you don't like and read what you like and try not to consciously write like either. And writing has to matter in a deep way. You have to make the time to actually write — seems obvious enough, but I often hear from people who say they want to write but have no time. And finally I tell them not to think of family and relatives and friends when they write, otherwise they will censor themselves without even knowing it.

Q. Can you imagine writing a novel set entirely in the United States? Have you started another project, and can you share anything about it?

A. I never say never to anything. My next work will be a novel of ideas about baseball. More seriously, I have many ideas, I am reading and absorbing and watching. I am also, deep down, a superstitious Igbo woman, and so don't like to talk about future work lest the spirits desert me.

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