

Adam Baldwin on His Personal Approach to Art Dealing

Interviews



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Since its founding in 2018 by dealer **Adam Baldwin**, Baldwin Contemporary has rapidly established itself on the market as one of the rising stars of the international blue chip art scene.

Operating from South Kensington (London) as a secondary market specialist, [Baldwin Contemporary](#) trades in works by established and emerging modern and contemporary artists, and is increasingly gaining a reputation as the advisor of choice for many younger collectors looking to acquire blue chip contemporary works of art.

Baldwin's original model for running and organizing the business attributed to its success — the gallery works on a **by-appointment model** and developed a strong online presence early on, allowing for a smooth transition into the Covid period. A personal approach to its collector base has also proved to be a fruitful payoff for the gallery.

Purposefully set up as a boutique model, Baldwin Contemporary created a niche on the market in contrast to the 'mega gallery' model that has been so popular over the past 20 years or so.

To learn more about its beginning, operational model, and collections, we talked with Baldwin Contemporary founder Adam Baldwin.



Installation shot of 'After Andy', Baldwin Contemporary October - November 2022. Courtesy Baldwin Contemporary

The Beginnings of Baldwin Contemporary

Widewalls: *Four years ago, you founded Baldwin Contemporary as a secondary market specialist focusing on the buying, selling, and trading of works of art by established artists. Can you tell us more about the gallery's beginnings and the early challenges you faced?*

Adam Baldwin: The answer here is pretty simple — I started out with a £350 Tracey Emin edition which I bought in 2016 and subsequently put through an auction. It sold for 10x what I paid for it, and I thought, this is quite interesting, and the whole thing just went from there.

The early challenge was having little-to-no capital. So using the proceeds of the Emin sale, I just started buying what I could afford — initially starting with posters, then moving onto prints, and then onwards from there. I started the online side of the business during the first COVID lockdown, which, looking back, I got a bit lucky given that I started it right at the time when everyone started buying art online during the lockdowns.

To cut a long story short, the whole thing kind of snowballed, and before I knew it, here I am, running a gallery.

Widewalls: *Why did you decide to focus on the secondary market, and what do you think are the pros and cons of this model?*

AB: The core part of our business is driven by secondary-market private sales, run on a 'by appointment' model. I believe this allows us to give truly objective advice to our collectors based entirely on what is right for them. Given how I started the business, a primary programme (and the associated costs involved) was just never really an option. In fact, had I started with a primary market programme then I would almost certainly be out of business by now.

The truth is — all I'm trying to do here is run a good old-fashioned art dealing business. I'm a big believer in the old school approach to art dealing — I'm not trying to complicate anything beyond what we need to. I just want to spend my time placing really great works of art with really great collectors.



Andy Warhol - Mao, 1973, courtesy Baldwin Contemporary

Business Model Based on Honesty and Trust

Widewalls: While the gallery has a mix of clients, it is becoming increasingly popular with the younger generation. What do you think would be the main reason for this? What attracts young collectors to Baldwin Contemporary?

AB: That's a good question. A lot of the artwork we handle is 20th Century Contemporary so that naturally tends to bring a younger clientele. By 'young,' I'm talking about people in their 30s and 40s. Naturally, they tend to be successful in their respective fields, and as such, they tend to be informed, smart and passionate about the work they collect.

Everything I do is very personal, and I think that has huge appeal. My clients want that personal approach, especially the younger generation of collectors. For the next generation of collectors, bigger is no longer necessarily better. Clearly, I only see a small part of the market; however, I'm seeing that honesty and trust are becoming increasingly valued by the younger generation of collectors — they want to hear from me about what I think of the work, the artist, the period and how I think it could fit into their collection.

And I'm very honest with my collectors about what I like and what I don't like. I think many of my clients appreciate the honesty of being told by their dealer, "I don't think you should buy that work."

Widewalls: In contrast to many other galleries, Baldwin Contemporary runs on a by-appointment basis. What are some of the benefits and drawbacks you've discovered from doing things this way?

AB: If you look at those galleries that have large sales teams, extensive primary programmes, and ambitious marketing budgets, well, frankly, that's just not us. My gallery was created during the COVID lockdowns, when essentially the whole world was largely operating 'by appointment.'

Opening a traditional 'storefront' primary gallery space at that point just didn't feel like a good bet to me. Now that we're out of that period, we're just happy running things as they are. By running a 'by appointment' model, we don't have to rely upon an exhibition program as a central part of our sales strategy, allowing us to avoid many of the large, fixed overheads typically associated with the traditional gallery model.

In fact, I've often said that what I'm building here is kind of the direct opposite of the 'mega gallery' model. I love what I do, and I'm comfortable with the scale that I do it at. Don't get me wrong - we're constantly looking at ways to grow the gallery, but we're doing it in our own, organic way.

Widewalls: The gallery trades in modern and contemporary blue-chip art. Who are the artists you are currently focusing on, and what are some of the names you worked with over the years?

AB: We handle a fairly broad range of artists. Two-thirds of it is what I'd class as 'established contemporary,' with the remainder being from the modern and Post War era. As a secondary market specialist, we typically focus on those artists united through their conceptual diligence, quality, and importance and with demonstrable museum, institutional, curatorial and secondary market momentum that has built up over a number of years.

Warhol has always been a focus for us, as has Damien Hirst, David Hockney, and Bridget Riley. Personally, I like works that have historical integrity but with a bit more of a challenging slant to them. It allows the viewer to re-examine the work, the artist, and the period within which the work sits.

At any one point, I try to assemble around me a range of artists from a range of time periods, and with time, you tend to find more and more things that you like. I always look for art that resonates with me.



Jordy Kerwick - Untitled 4, 2020, courtesy Baldwin Contemporary

The Baldwin Shop

Baldwin Contemporary also has a strong online presence with its prints and multiples platform, 'Baldwin Shop,' featuring major artists such as Warhol and Weiwei. What are the guiding ideas behind this project, and how does the selection process work?

AB: Dealing in prints and multiples online during the COVID lockdowns is really how we got our big break, and so even though much of what I do now is what you'd call 'offline sales,' our online prints and multiples presence remains an important part of our overall business and an integral part of our story.

It also opens the gallery up to a new breed of collector, which for me, is hugely important as we continue to build the gallery. In general, our online business typically deals in established contemporary names in the sub £100,000 range.

For this side of the business, we buy our prints inventory on our balance sheet, which can often give us a different attitude to how and when we choose to sell our stock. In fact, we've recently been buying quite a few blue-chip editioned prints for a medium to long-term hold strategy.

Widewalls: The gallery has grown rapidly over the course of four years. What do you think contributed to its success?

AB: You know, it's interesting to me that people see the growth we've had and comment on it when it's actually quite a simple business model when you think about it. What I will say is that we got lucky with our timings – we benefitted significantly from the exponential growth in the online art market during COVID.

Early on in my career, I was told — do your own thing and don't compare yourself to others. That's always stuck with me. Fortunately, we've built the gallery based around a truly great group of collectors who follow us, listen to us, and share our passion for the works that we handle.

One of the things I find important about running a gallery is the distinct identity each one should take from their founder. For me, I'm influenced by the older generation of dealers and how they ran their galleries – people like Castelli, Gagosian, Bischofberger, Arne Glimcher, and Bill Acquavella.

For over a hundred years now, every successful major gallery going back to Paul Durand-Ruel has had its own clear, distinct vibe from its founder, and so to some extent, we're all doing our own thing. I love that.



Keith Haring - Art Attack on Aids, 1988, courtesy Baldwin Contemporary

The Importance of Secondary Markets

Widewalls: *The art market has gone through some significant changes in the last few years. What areas do you consider undervalued, and who are the artists we should keep an eye on?*

AB: I get asked this question a lot. I'm a little concerned about the level of speculation there is in the market right now. Some people seem to now just view art as another commodity they can buy and then sell for a profit later on. I don't really like that.

I think it's important for young artists to try to avoid the speculative hubris that exists. Every few years, another group of these so-called 'red hot' artists pop up in the auctions, with many quickly becoming pretty overvalued. Then fast forward a couple of years and almost all of them have disappeared.

Active, healthy secondary markets are important, but it's important for an artist's market to develop on a merited and measured basis.

Widewalls: *What does a typical day in your life look like? How do you plan and organize your schedule around the hectic pace of the market?*

AB: It varies. The last few weeks have been really crazy, with studio visits, private views, and travelling taking up most of my attention. We're located in South Kensington, and I live nearby in Chelsea, so I'm lucky that I can walk to work when I want. Aside from the gallery, we also have interests in a number of art-related ventures, so there's always something going on in one of those that needs my attention.

Typically, you'll find me in London running around to studios, galleries, and with clients and/or people I'm working with at any given moment. I've got a great team around me, and whilst it's often fast-paced, we make it work.

Featured image: Adam Baldwin. Courtesy Baldwin Contemporary

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