

“I wasn’t sure I wanted a heightened, deepened hustle”

DEALER INTERVIEW

JAMES FUENTES

The Art Newspaper: What was it like to exhibit right at the heart of Art Basel Miami Beach?

James Fuentes: It was a huge deal—it was like being in the art puzzle. It’s definitely one of the highlights of my career.

TAN: You started out as an artist. How did you make the transition?

JF: I fell into it out of college. I rented a storefront in 1998, and my intention was to live and work there. People started knocking on the door looking for Gavin Brown’s enterprise—it had been his space. I couldn’t believe this 300 sq. ft shoebox had been a viable gallery, and thought: “Why don’t I put up a show to help pay the rent?” I called on three artists I knew—it was the most obvious, easiest thing to do.

TAN: Did the work sell?

JF: Absolutely not. For the most part I made my living as a security guard at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It paid a good salary and allowed me to create an umbrella for these artists.

TAN: Why did you close?

JF: I was so naive—my publicity was making postcards and handing them out at parties to friends. I realized that I needed a nuts-and-bolts education about how to do this properly.

TAN: What did you learn from working at Deitch Projects?

JF: I remember feeling overwhelmed by the quagmire of the social network—the infinite possibilities and thousands of people. Jeffrey said: “It’s really simple—it’s about relationships. It’s just a one-on-one thing—spend time with people.”

TAN: When did you decide to leave Deitch, and why?

JF: I was about to turn 30 and was at a crossroads. In the early part of my career I was able to hone my voice. Then I learned what it takes to do this for a long time. But I was still overwhelmed. I realized that the hustle actually gets more intense for people in a position like Jeffrey, or galleries like Lühring Augustine or Gagosian. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to sign up for the prospect of a heightened, deepened hustle.

TAN: Why did you reopen?

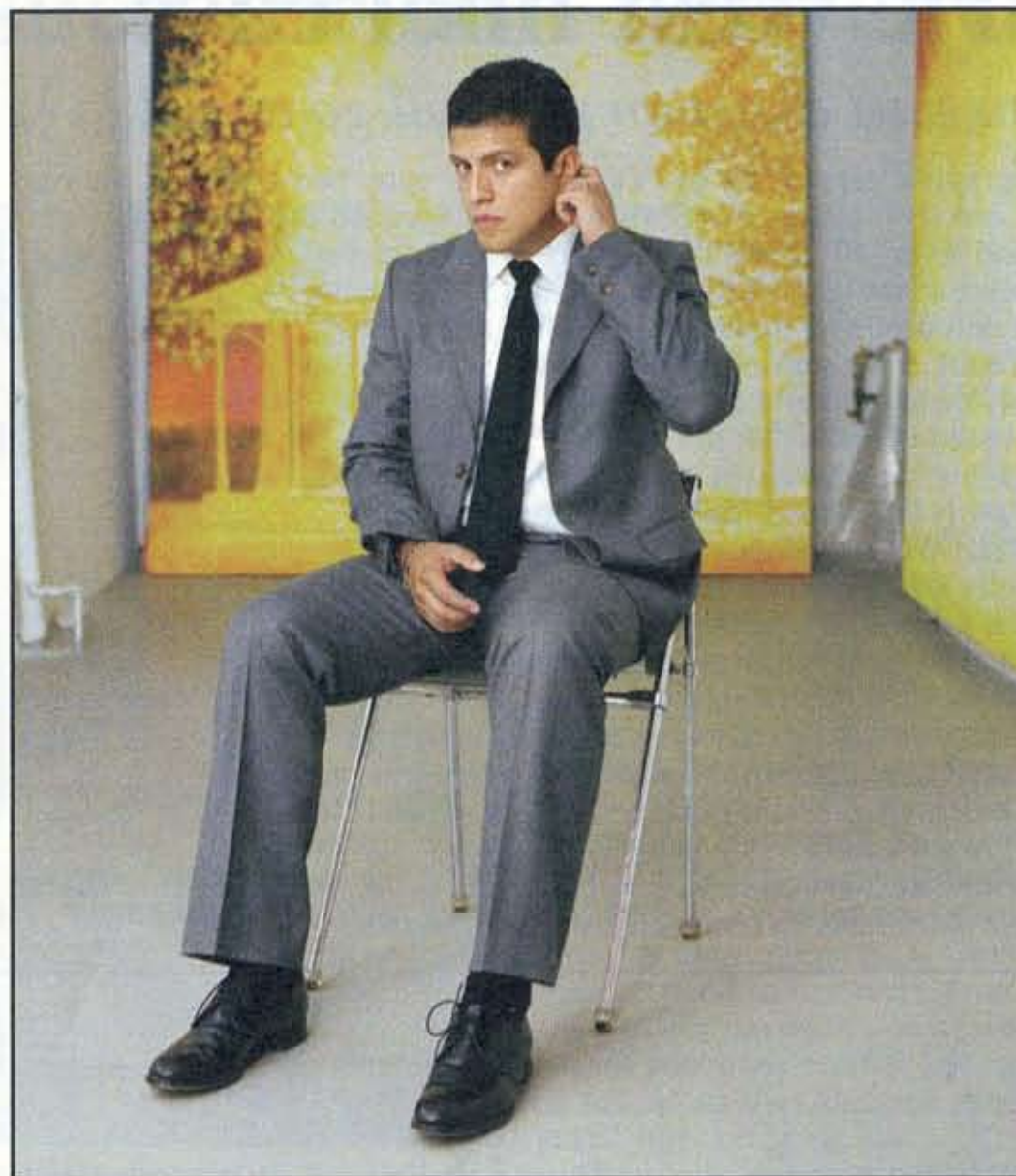
JF: I was looking for an apartment and saw a sign saying \$2,700 per month to rent a whole building. I thought: “If I can get this building, I’ll open up a gallery.” In those years of training I’d almost suppressed the idea of reopening, especially because space is so crucial to the equation. It’s the biggest piece of the puzzle, and it was sorted in that instant.

TAN: You opened in 2007, in the middle of the boom.

JF: My second show was Agathe Snow, and we hadn’t made one sale because the work was so challenging. I sent Jpegs to everyone I could think of. Half were people I knew, and the others were what they call a “Hail Mary” in American football—the quarterback throws the ball not knowing where it’s going, but hopes his team-mate will catch it. I decided to invest in professional images of the work at the end of the month, when I was at my wit’s end, and I re-emailed some people. Philly Adams at Saatchi called back the next morning and bought eight sculptures.

TAN: Do you worry about Saatchi flipping the works?

JF: You can’t stop it, so why not be better prepared for that possibility by understanding the market and the market that you’re



James Fuentes: from Met security guard to Miami mover

trying to create, and be pragmatic about pricing. The most expensive Agathe Snow is \$15,000-\$18,000, so it would be impossible to turn around and sell it for \$100,000 right now. Pricing is an important, ongoing conversation, and I want to lay foundations for something long-term.

TAN: How was your first art fair—Nada in Miami in 2007?

JF: We sold more in a four-day period than we had over the first 11 months. Half of what we sold we didn’t even have there—we sold from images in a book, like a \$22,000 painting by an artist no one ever heard of. I was high—it was like having a good night at the casino. I thought “I want to do an art fair every month!”

Those days are gone—it’s frankly better for the field. It didn’t really feel natural.

TAN: How did you cope when the market crashed?

JF: In September [2008], I put on an Agathe Snow exhibition, and Roman Signer made a sculpture for our courtyard. I had a waiting list, and was sure this was my home-run exhibition. Agathe’s premise was that America was about to enter a new chapter. The show opened on 9 September and sure enough, days later, Lehman Brothers collapsed.

TAN: Did the crisis have an immediate impact?

JF: There were zero transactions going into December. Everyone bailed. Half of that waiting list

stopped collecting for a solid year. The one great thing was a visit from the Guggenheim Museum Young Collectors’ Council. Katherine Brinson and Nancy Spector at the Guggenheim expressed an interest in presenting one of the sculptures to the acquisitions committee.

We did Artissima that November: same thing—tumbleweed, an uphill battle. Not only were we making no sales but I missed Obama winning the election. But in Turin I got an e-mail from the Guggenheim: “We’re happy to tell you that the acquisition is going to happen.” It was the one sale we made in that grim period. We were hurting.

TAN: How did you keep going?

JF: There was left-over cashflow from the time before. We had such a low overhead.

TAN: When did it pick up?

JF: The ball started rolling again last year in Miami. Nada was decent. We made our booth costs back, reconnected with clients and met some new ones. It was enough to justify keeping going.

You have to roll with the punches. In March I curated an exhibition that was mindful of the economy. I was able to rent a 5,000 sq. ft Chelsea space for next to nothing—a gallery had closed and I worked something out with the landlord. I had two spaces, one showing functional furniture, and we made the highest volume of sales of any show.

It’s still a fight, but New York is solid right now. Lower East Side galleries are kicking ass in

the \$15,000 and under bracket—things could definitely be better but we’re doing OK.

TAN: Do you have a price point that you don’t go above?

JF: No, not at all. Jonas Mekas’s work is in a whole other category, up to \$60,000. The Roman Signer sculpture is \$45,000. You need that occasional work.

TAN: What can you tell us about the new gallery week in New York next May?

JF: The premise was to create the synergy of an art fair, and keep down the overheads. I’m really looking forward to it—almost [all the participants are] super established dealers, and I would love to be in that context.

TAN: Are you going to expand—take on new artists or buy your building?

JF: Absolutely, but I feel I might outgrow the space soon. I’m going to maintain my operation at the same overhead. I’ve seen spaces with triple the footage for close to the same price.

TAN: Where would you move?

JF: Although my identity is connected to the Lower East Side, hopefully what I’m creating could exist anywhere. The Bowery has legs—Sperone Westwater’s permanent space is going to be a real anchor. I like Orchard Street, Allen Street or the West Side. I’d be open to Chelsea. I’m on the lookout for new artists but have to be mindful of the context we’re creating. I’m expanding in a steady way, and I’m hopeful.

Interview by Charlotte Burns

- April 1998: James Fuentes, aged 21, opens his first gallery on Broome Street
- April 2000: Closes gallery; goes on to curate over 20 independent exhibitions
- June 2004-April 2005: director at Lombard-Freid
- April 2005-December 2005: director at Deitch Projects; co-conceives *Artstar*, a

- reality-TV show starring Jeffrey Deitch
- January 2007: James Fuentes LLC opens in Chinatown, representing nine artists including Jonas Mekas and Brian DeGraw
- December 2009: One of 23 gallerists selected for Art Positions, a section dedicated to young galleries at Art Basel Miami Beach