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FLAG ART FOUNDATION CELEBRATES ITS FIRST DECADE

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THE FLAG ART FOUNDATION DIRECTOR STEPHANIE ROACH IN FRONT OF ELLSWORTH KELLY'S BLACK RELIEF WITH WHITE, 2005, AT GAGOSIAN GALLERY. PORTRAIT BY KYLE DOROSZ.

For any successful venture, a decennial anniversary is a reflective occasion to take stock of achievements and honor the milestone, but also to ponder the future. The question often on everyone's mind, and perhaps the most vexing for a high-caliber art venue: So what's on tap for the next decade?

It has been 10 years since The FLAG Art Foundation, founded by art patron Glenn Fuhrman, launched its inaugural group exhibition. And that first show, "Attention to Detail," curated under the vision of painter Chuck Close, placed the non-profit on Manhattan's cultural radar, right out of the gate. Among the works that stand out in my memory: a painstaking Tara Donovan sculpture, made from over a million wooden toothpicks—which at first glance, might be mistaken for a haystack—and one of Damien Hirst's meticulous mirrored cabinets, its painted pills placed individually, during installation with a set of tweezers.

"I didn't have any super thought out grand plans," says Fuhrman, reflecting on his vision in 2008. "My idea was simply to create a space that would put on excellent shows of contemporary art that I wanted to see. I assumed if they would excite me they would be of interests to others as well."



AN INSTALLATION VIEW OF "ATTENTION TO DETAIL" AT THE FLAG ART FOUNDATION, 2008. PHOTO BY GENEVIEVE HANSON.

Yet, looking back at the roster, there is one constant that, in hindsight, made "Attention to Detail" so prescient. For each of its 50 shows thus far, FLAG has taken evident pleasure pursuing every last aesthetic detail. Indeed, viewers have come to expect museum-quality artwork and curatorial gravitas, whether an exhibit of heavyweights, like Roy Lichtenstein and Gerhard Richter, or one of younger artists, such as the presentation of Yale's 2014 MFA photography thesis show.

Still, FLAG manages to take considerable conceptual risks along the way too. A favorite example: relocating Patricia Cronin's *Shrine for Girls*, from its original context at the 2015 Venice Biennale, for which FLAG and the Fuhrman family foundation were lead sponsors. There, the artist heaped women's garments from India, Ireland and Nigeria atop the sacred marble altars of the 16th-century church, Chiesa di San Gallo. At FLAG, Cronin reimagined her haunting human rights installation for a definitively secular environ—the same three fabric sculptures now piled on shipping crates. And last summer, with over 80 artists, FLAG presented "The Times," using the hallowed newspaper as a point of departure to address our persistent state of uncertainty. How, the show asked, does contemporary art engage the nation's "paper of record" to frame the issues that impact our everyday lives? Rirkrit Tiravanija's massive canvas greeted visitors with the foreboding words, "Tomorrow is the question," painted over The New York Times from the morning after President's Trump's inauguration.



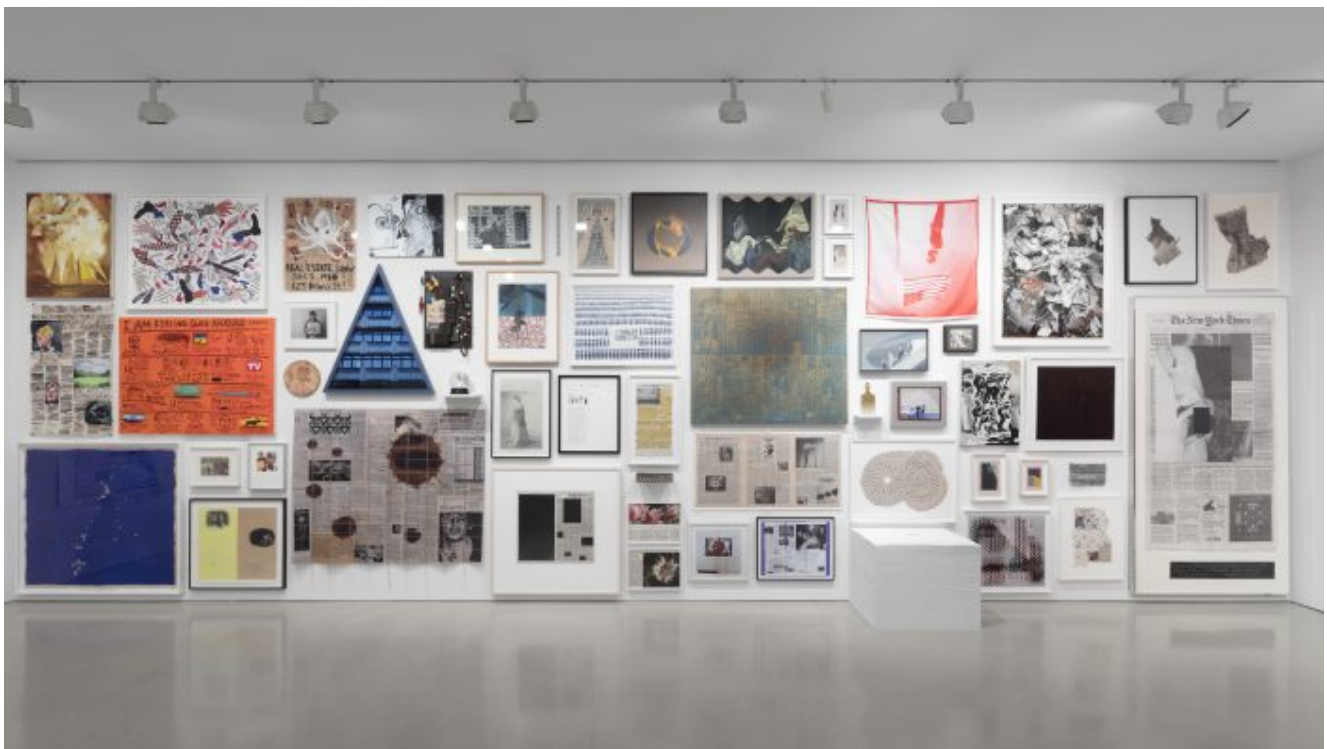
PATRICIA CRONIN'S *SHRINE FOR GIRLS* INSTALLATION FROM 2016.

But also—and certainly not something you find every day in the white-hot center of New York's art district—FLAG has a decidedly approachable vibe, an attitude that flows from the top down. In a gallery world that seldom makes bold overtures to neophytes, it is somewhat of a feat. Aficionados, school groups and tourists alike are all welcome in the two-story space. In fact, newcomers may be surprised, when they arrive on the 9th floor of the Chelsea Arts Tower, that a member of FLAG's small, dedicated team greets you, and in many cases, offers a personal walkthrough of the current exhibition.

It turns out, that was always part of the larger plan. "Our mission hasn't changed since our early and nascent stages," explains Stephanie Roach, FLAG's director from the go. "Since our inception, our

mission has been to encourage the appreciation of contemporary art among a diverse audience, and we're continually expanding what that means." This is likely one of the reasons FLAG has such a devoted Instagram following. Their posts allow them to connect with viewers who might not get a chance to regularly enjoy contemporary art in person. Embracing a guest curator like Shaquille O'Neal didn't hurt either. His 2010 show, "Size Does Matter," was an enchanting *Alice in Wonderland*-like experience, that ranged from an Ogre-sized dining table and chairs-sculpture by Robert Therrien to a tiny, functioning Maurizio Cattelan elevator. Most of all, O'Neal sent a clear message: FLAG was open to thinking beyond the art world.

When we met in her office on the 9th floor of the Chelsea Arts Tower this winter, with its wide-angle views of lower Manhattan, Roach shared some of the practical challenges when she began the job. Fuhrman trusted her instincts implicitly—a bet that has paid off in spades—hiring her only a year after she graduated from the University of Pennsylvania. The space was fully under construction then; some of her earliest, crucial tasks were as quotidian as getting phone lines installed. Over the years, however, technical obstacles have been more of the dramatic, art variety: could the floor handle the overwhelming weight of Therrien's furniture? How to affix Ugo Rondinone's neon-lit sign, *Love Invents Us*, to the outdoor terrace so it could withstand high winds and eventually, Superstorm Sandy?



AN INSTALLATION VIEW OF "THE TIMES," 2017. PHOTO BY STEVEN PROBERT.

"At the beginning, we didn't have a signature style per se," says Roach. "Some shows have been reflective and meditative, and strummed at your heartstrings, while others made you laugh and feel joyous." That balanced approach, she believes, reflects the art of our time. "It's always been about giving a platform to artists and allowing them to fully realize their creative vision."

This month, to celebrate the 10 years, FLAG is presenting an intimate selection of Ellsworth Kelly's work, curated by Kelly's partner, photographer Jack Shear. With rarely-seen drawings, paintings, and sculptures by one of America's most prominent postwar art figures, the focus is Kelly's mastery in black and white. At the same time, on the floor above, in a parallel show, they'll display an impressive collection of women, including Sarah Crowner and Sam Moyer, among others. Highlighting an iconic Kelly—who was quite personally meaningful to Fuhrman—and a fresh crop of emergent, female talent, perfectly encapsulates the foundation.

Later this year, FLAG will release an anniversary catalogue, an opportunity to revisit the artists and curators they've worked with—but also a chance to broaden a dialogue they've only just begun. "It's really a wonderful way to celebrate a decade," says Roach.

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