

A conversation with Michael Bell

BY MEREDITH TROMBLE

Michael Bell is an independent curator who founded Visual Art Access, a business which provides artists with detailed career information, advice and strategies. He began his own museum career in 1975 as a CETA employee, and has held curatorial positions at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the San Francisco Art Commission.



Michael Bell

Disillusioned with the limitations of institutional practice, he established VAA in 1987 to teach artists to represent themselves. His philosophy is expressed in the tattoo-like symbol for VAA, a predatory hawk with a heart.

Artweek *You deal with artists all over the country, talking with them about their work and their careers. Have you seen many recessionary-related trends?*

Michael Bell The bad news is that there are just as many exhibitions taking place, but many fewer sales. Since October of 1990, there has been pressure on sales from several different directions besides the most obvious one, which is art collectors with less money to spend on art.

Change in the tax law regarding donations has reduced the number of donations to museums. But it also discouraged collectors who bought contemporary art because they could at least get fair market value for it as a donation.

There is a decided decrease in the number of percent-for-art programs or art-in-public places mandated by various local governments around the United States. This affects regional art tremendously. Most people associate percent-for-art mainly with large site-specific works, but, in fact, most of the art bought for those purposes is small- or medium-scale work, in

the range of \$1000 or less, retail.

One of the most interesting consequences of the recession has been that a great many artists have excess inventory. They have been trained to produce. I even have a copy

of a letter from a curator which admonishes artists to produce at least ten new works per year. Artists keep creating in spite of the fact that they can't sell, diverting their income into inventory. The recession only makes that worse. As a matter of cultural politics,

it's very interesting that they've been driven to do this excess production. It's resulted in an enormous waste of art supplies, storage space and disposable income.

AW *Auction trends have been lethargic as well.*

MB You can hardly sell a Cézanne anymore. The vast majority of lots are not selling. The ones that are selling are going below estimate, and many are bought in, meaning someone in the audience indicates that the piece has sold even though it hasn't.

The *New York Times* once put out a graph of art sales in America which showed that, for thirty years, the rate of growth of art sales was extremely gradual, in the five to ten percent range. Steady growth, but very gradual. Then, in 1980, there was a twentyfold increase. We're experiencing the aftermath of the 'correction' in this inflationary trend, when things drop back towards the baseline.

Artists in the range of a Deborah Butterfield or Mel Ramos enjoyed a pretty good success over the last twenty years. But the twentyfold increase in auction prices and retail sales that occurred between 1980 and 1990 put their auction prices out of reach for most people today. And the speculators ran off with the

profits just like they did with the savings and loans. It's criminal.

AW *I don't imagine that the artists thought the high prices were criminal at the time.*

MB Measured growth has never been the hallmark of a visual artist. There's a fascinating book called *300 Years of American Art*. The authors created a simple bar graph for each artist's work, showing the percent of increase or decrease from fair market value during the period of the study. I thought—and a lot of artists think—that once you start selling, you can expect a gradual increase over the course of your career. Not at all. Not for anybody. Not for O'Keeffe, not for Pollock, not for Stella. This data undermines the concept of art as an investment.

AW *Is there any good news in the recession for the art world?*

MB The good news is that there's more art selling at lower prices and at higher price points. Anything below \$10,000 retail and above \$30,000 retail is selling. It's good for the lesser-known artists. More works on paper are selling. Non-avant-garde or non-academic fine art is selling. The people who buy art have caught on to the fact that the art industry is like the fashion industry, in that it imposes trends on buyers and makes them feel guilty if they don't participate. What's selling now are landscapes, still lifes and flower paintings.

AW *Weren't those things selling before?*

MB They were not selling well until about 1985. Then the art world tried to impose Neo-Geo on everybody, and the ones who knew better said, you've got to be kidding. I've noticed an upward trend in the

sale of nonobjective abstraction, which is not surprising. It's nonconfrontational. At least it doesn't deal with issues that the original abstract expressionists were dealing with. And even if it did, buyers probably wouldn't know it.

AW *Do you think these economic vicissitudes will effect some kind of permanent change in the structure of the art world and market?*

MB I hope so. Perhaps it will give us all a respite, a return to true fair market value, and cause galleries to rethink their pricing structures. That will probably result once again in an inflation within the next twenty years or so. Everybody's going to calm down, and then the minute they do and it's all working just fine, the speculators will come back. And they'll screw everything up.

Meredith Tromble is a painter who also does art commentary for KQED-FM.

In the Bay Area galleries, cautious optimism currently reigns

BY LEIGH ANN CLIFTON

When San Francisco art dealer Kay Kimpton closed her eleven-year-old gallery on New Year's Eve, 1991, the decision was painfully made, but she has never regretted it. She'd been maintaining a space at 228 Grant Street, a multi-gallery building, for two years, a relocation which had been necessitated by the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, and she was struggling to keep the business afloat. Finally, exhausted and financially troubled, she let it go.

"The recession hit and I was in this high-profile space but nobody was buying," she said. Now, Kimpton is still in business, but works out of her home. She represents several artists and consults, and has continued to sell inventory accumulated during her gallery days. "It's a bit more manageable," she said, adding that "many dealers

envy my position."

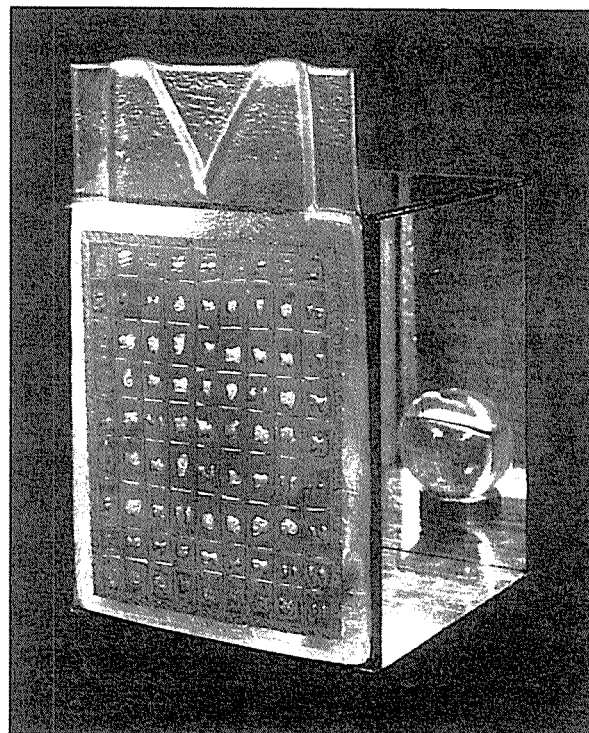
This is not an isolated situation, by any means. During the past several years, a number of San Francisco galleries have closed their doors, and more may follow soon, if rumors are even partially accurate, largely as

a result of pressures exacerbated by the recession.

San Francisco, generally a conservative gallery market, never became deeply entangled in the excessive eighties-era art marketplace activities that would later return to haunt New York

and Los Angeles. For the most part, Bay Area galleries dealt primarily with the effects of the earthquake and the recession, without the additional pressure of a bust market. The true health of the gallery scene is difficult to assess, of course; there are no studies or objective indicators, although there is an abundance of subjective opinion.

"I've always been concerned [about the gallery scene]," said David Love, director of Vorpil Gallery. "I think it's always been weak in San Francisco. It's an old money city, very conservative—



Dana Zed, detail of *Oracle*, 1992, mixed media/glass, 58-1/2" x 11-1/2" x 11-1/2". (Photo: Janna Waldinger. Courtesy of Braunstein/Quay Gallery, San Francisco.)