





# *TOWERING* SUCCESS

SPERONE WESTWATER



**I**t feels as though several thresholds have been crossed by the time one walks into Sperone Westwater on the Bowery – a stretch of the avenue known as much for the venerable New Museum as for its impoverished history of artists and squatters. After the grit and traffic of the boulevard, one enters the ground floor of the Norman Foster-designed building – glowing, white and cathedral-like and wonderfully quiet after the din of the street.

Since its establishment almost four decades ago, New York’s Sperone Westwater has presented the works of world-renowned artists. **Aniella Perold** visits the blue-chip gallery and meets the team at the Foster + Partners-designed headquarters.

Opening spread:  
 Founding partner  
 Angela Westwater stands  
 underneath Richard  
 Long’s *River Aron Mud  
 Crescent*. 2011. Black  
 paint and River Avon mud.  
 Diameter: 823 cm.

This page:  
 Exterior view of Sperone  
 Westwater at 257 Bowery,  
 New York. © Nigel Young/  
 Foster + Partners.

Facing page:  
 Angela Westwater and  
 Gian Enzo Sperone.  
 © Sandra Hamburg.

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The construction of this building, the third location for founding partners Gian Enzo Sperone and Angela Westwater, is entirely in keeping with a city that is dynamic but compact, impressive but quirky. Once Sperone had scouted out the location, Westwater, who is personally acquainted with Norman Foster, approached Foster + Partners about the project in 2007. She recalls that the gallery’s artists, too, were excited by the prospect of such a prominent architect signing on. The lot’s footprint is only 38 metres, yet the building’s eight storeys (three or four of which are used for public exhibitions) make clever use of vertical space, avoiding the ‘big white cube’ effect, which Westwater notes “is not in the interest of all artists”. The main gallery’s almost nine-metre tall ceiling, combined with a high-placed rear skylight and a balcony of undulating glass overhead, create the sort of visual impact that com-



pels one to pause, peer upward and luxuriate in the surrounding light and artworks.

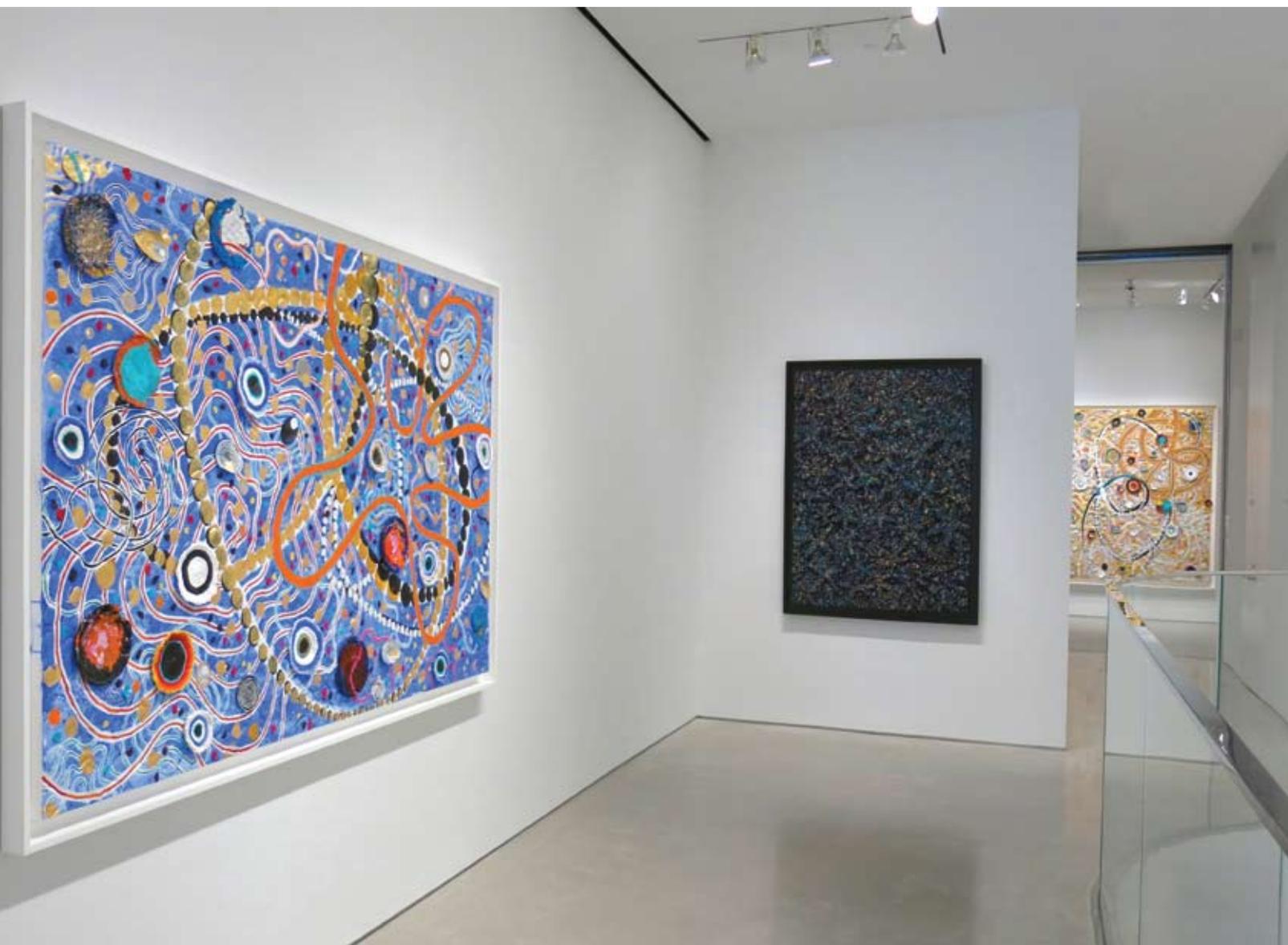
On the front face of the building, an approximately four-by-six metre “moving room” extends floors two, three, four, or five, moving between them depending on the changing needs of each artist and exhibition. So seamless does this feature seem from the inside that gallery director David Leiber remarks, “once people are in here and engaged by the work, I find that they really forget where they are, although it is the same structure that they walked under as they entered the gallery.” Only a panel of buttons on one wall calls attention to the reality that one is in fact standing in an elevator. People often mistakenly refer to it as “the freight elevator” adds Leiber, forgetting that its shaft does not extend to the ground level.

## BREAKING GROUND

As veterans of the New York City gallery scene since the 1970s, Sperone and Westwater can appreciate the unlikelihood of a blue-chip art institution ending up in this spot on the Lower East Side. Though many artists resided in the area in the 1970s, “You simply would not have had a gallery here [then],” says Westwater. In an interview last year, she recalled that Mark Rothko worked

nearby out of a former YMCA building called the Bunker; and that she listened to Philip Glass “rehearse in an empty, unheated building” a few blocks away on the corner of Bleecker and Elizabeth streets. The Bowery would hardly have been a desirable address for anyone looking to sell major works of art. Now, however, there are three buildings by Pritzker Prize-winning architects within the space of six blocks – the Cooper Union Academic Building (by Thomas Mayne), the New Museum (by Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa/SANAA) and Sperone Westwater itself. A destination for tourists, students and lovers of art and architecture, Westwater sees the “energy and diversity of the people who live and work” in the Lower East Side as a real cultural asset that is harder to come by in other parts of the city.

The genesis of the nearly 40 year-long partnership between Sperone and Westwater began in the autumn of 1971, when Westwater was working as a “gallery girl” at John Weber’s newly opened space at 420 West Broadway, the first multi-gallery building to open in SoHo. At that time, Sperone had a gallery in Torino, which Leiber notes was the “first in Italy to show many vanguard American movements of the 1960s – Pop, Minimalism, Conceptual work – including Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol and Bruce Nauman, as well as the Arte Povera artists – Anselmo, Boetti, Merz, Pistoletto, etc.” In the autumn of 1971, Westwater met Konrad Fischer,



This page:  
Installation view of the  
Nabil Nahas exhibition at  
the gallery.  
Left to right: *Kirak*. 2013.  
Acrylic on canvas. 165.1 x  
257 cm; Untitled. 2013.  
Acrylic on canvas. 165.1 x  
135 cm; and *Betty Boop*.  
2013. Acrylic on canvas.  
165.1 x 165.1 x 8 cm.

Facing page:  
Above: David Leiber with  
Wim Delvoye's *Dual Möbius  
Quad Corpus*. 2010.  
Polished bronze.  
93 x 167 x 42 cm.  
Below: Ali Banisadr. *Paper  
Tiger*. 2013. Oil on linen.  
40.6 x 40.6 cm.  
Private Collection.

the Avant-garde dealer from Dusseldorf, who would become the third founding partner of the original Sperone Westwater Fischer and was responsible for introducing Nauman, Sol LeWitt, Carl Andre and Gilbert and George to Europe. The three met again at Documenta 5 in the summer of 1972 and after Westwater's three-year stint as managing editor at *Artforum*, decided to open the gallery at 142 Greene Street in 1975.

The year was a historic low in New York City's economic history: President Gerald Ford had declined a bailout plan for the bankrupt city, at which point Westwater ruefully recalls the *New York Daily News*' headline reading, "Ford to City: Drop Dead." It was the worst possible time to open a gallery," she says, clearly not missing the irony as she speaks to me from the glassy upper reaches of the new Sperone Westwater building. What one might easily miss on a first look, given the rarefied air of the gallery's physical space and its impressive roster of artists – which includes Wim Delvoye, Guillermo Kuitca, Richard Long, Malcolm Morley, Nauman, Susan Rothenberg, Tom Sachs and William Wegman, among others – is that the work behind the scenes is highly personal and

hands-on. The staff of about a dozen is modest for a gallery of Sperone Westwater's stature; "You won't find any 'assistant to the assistant' here," asserts Leiber. In an art world which, in recent years has seen galleries evolve into 'multinational corporations,' there is a wholesome feeling about the Sperone Westwater leadership and their focus on what – in many cases – are decades-long relationships with artists and clients. The sales teams that have become common in operations such as Gagosian and Pace are "antithetical" says Leiber, to the way that he and his colleagues conceive of their work.

## A SELECT STABLE

On the subject of their artists, Westwater and Leiber's demeanours completely shift and soften. "Each relationship is special, almost heirloom," remarks Leiber, who has been with the gallery since 1988. "Some of our dearest friends are also the same artists and clients that we have worked with over the years." When asked what the most satisfying part of her profession is, Westwater does not pause for a moment: "Hav-



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*David Leiber*

ing a relationship with a small group of artists over a long period of time. Helping them realise projects, educating a broader audience about their work, finding good homes for it, and watching them become the subject of museum exhibitions and enter major public collections.”

The breadth of Sperone Westwater’s roster has expanded from its original core, which comprised artists of the European Avant-garde – such as Wolfgang Laib and Mario Merz, as well as American mainstays like Nauman and Rothenberg – to now include some important names from Asia and the Middle East. “Sometimes you get very good recommendations from artists about other artists,” says Leiber. Among these are Liu Ye, the erudite son of a children’s book author who grew up in Beijing and now makes enchanting, yet restrained figurative and abstract paintings, including the astounding *Bamboo Bamboo Broadway* shown at the gallery last autumn. Another is Nabil Nahas, a Lebanese artist known for his fractal works, who has been with the gallery since 1997. Of late, “people have finally caught up to Nabil’s work,” Leiber proudly reports. And then there are Iranian painter

Ali Banisadr and Turkish artist Kutluğ Ataman – the former’s large-scale triptych, *Fravashi*, is currently on show at the Venice Biennale and he is set to have his first exhibition at Sperone Westwater in March 2014; while the latter staged a much-noted exhibition, *Mesopotamian Dramaturgies*, at the gallery late last year.

Though the Middle Eastern contingent that Sperone Westwater represents is worth remarking on, the directors are firm on the point that the work itself is more remarkable. Nationality and socio-political background seem to matter to them only to the extent that any artist’s biography influences his/her work and can be felt through it. Leiber quotes Ye on the subject, who has said, “A thousand years ago, there was a terrible political system, but there was still good art. I have my political ideas, but that’s my politics; my art is my art. Art is not a weapon.” Leiber continues, “a work may of course reflect the political moment in which it was made, but it must also reveal something more, some greater truth or expression. The best artists seem to understand how important it is to limit their choices.”

Interestingly, it is the case with all three – Nahas, Banisadr and Ataman – that the most directly self-referential, and thus historical, work seems to have come when they were at a remove in time and place from their up-bringsings. Nahas, for example, has, for the last few years, focused on a series of paintings



This page:  
Evan Penny. *Female Stretch, Variation #2*. 2011. Silicone, pigment hair and aluminium. 304 x 66 x 53 cm.

Facing page:  
Works by Wim Delvoye. Foreground: *Suppo* (scale model 1:2). 2010. Laser-cut stainless steel. 620 x 75 cm.  
Background: *Dual Möbius Quad Corpus*. 2010. Polished bronze. 93 x 167 x 42 cm.





This page:  
Not Vital. *Tongue*.  
2008. Stainless steel.  
788 x 166 x 166 cm.

Facing page:  
Kutluğ Ataman. Still from  
*Journey to the Moon*.  
2009. Two channel video  
projection with sound.

*All images courtesy  
Sperone Westwater,  
New York.*

of torqued, heavily shaded cedar and olive trees that grow in his native Lebanon; these are the first of his works that remind one in any distinct way of his heritage.

The idea that one must go away in order to come back, creatively speaking, seems to resonate across these artists' careers: Ataman did his undergraduate and MFA in the USA before returning to Istanbul and Banisadr emigrated from Tehran to California as a teenager and has since settled in New York. Perhaps this pattern simply has to do with the critical gestation period required for strong work to emerge, or a certain coolness that time affords, allowing one to more deftly approach personal history as an artistic subject.

## ART'S TIMELESSNESS

Ataman's 2009 work *Journey to the Moon* is a historical fiction about Anatolian villagers who transform a minaret into a spaceship and fly to the moon, never to be seen again. "As much as the piece may reference socio-political aspects of Turkey, its content transcends them, addressing larger and more universal themes, such as reality versus artifice, faith versus science and tradition



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versus modernisation,” says Westwater. Banisadr, whose almost ecstatic paintings are never smaller than 76 x 91 cm, brim with colour, stroke and brief figural references and also seem to reach beyond personal history in favour of a more collective one. “They evoke this synesthetic experience where he’s almost trying to depict sound visually, whether it’s the sound of explosions or a disrupted situation,” Leiber reflects. “They’re very classical paintings in that respect.”

In today’s ever more global, hotly political and rapidly changing world, what counts for Sperone Westwater is a work’s timelessness, autonomy and versatility. “They [Nahas and Banisadr] are both ‘high style’ painters and it’s interesting to see how well their pictures sit and breathe with other types of work and objects from different civilisations and epochs,” says Leiber. “If we visit an artist and they have too elaborate a rap, that’s a bit suspicious. They’re not open enough to different interpretations.”

As Leiber and I make our way to the administrative offices of the Sperone Westwater building, I notice that the collection does not end with the galleries. The sixth floor, on which several staff members work, has several Wegman photographs and a painting by Nahas among the filing cabinets and desks. On the seventh floor, Leiber introduces me to a carved onyx sculpture of artist Barry X Ball’s screaming face, one of Otto Piene’s mesmerising *Fire Paintings* and a historic Frank Moore painting of a beheaded, Medusa-like Kate Moss that was commissioned by Gianni Versace shortly before his death. I could hear a voice over the frosted glass door that sounded efficient, authoritative, but cheerful. It belonged to Westwater, whom I asked to explain how her job had evolved since those early days of the gallery’s founding. Almost four decades later, she says, “I’ve never been busier in my life!” 🗣️