

Frieze New York pays tribute to art dealer Hudson

A new section highlights the artists he spotted early and championed passionately



Hudson in New York in 2005 © Judy Linn
Julie Belcove APRIL 27, 2018

For most of the 30 years the late art dealer Hudson — whose refusal to divulge his first name was but one of his eccentricities — operated the gallery Feature Inc, initially in Chicago and then New York, he assiduously avoided art fairs. In his view, they had the “vacuity of shopping malls”. So it is with some irony, which his friends say he would have appreciated, that Frieze New York’s first-ever themed section this week will be in his memory.

The section, titled “For Your Infotainment: Hudson and Feature Inc”, will highlight many of the artists Hudson, who died unexpectedly in 2014 at the age of 63, spotted early and championed passionately, including [Takashi Murakami](#), [Raymond Pettibon](#) and Tom Friedman. There will be seven solo booths and one two-artist booth presented by the artists’ current galleries, such as Gagosian (Murakami), David Zwirner (Pettibon) and Stephen Friedman Gallery (Friedman), as well as a non-selling exhibition featuring 15 artists, among them B Wurtz, Lily van der Stokker, Kay Rosen, Lisa Beck and Nancy Shaver.

“An art fair seemed an unusually interesting context to celebrate an art dealer, since an art fair is really 200 art dealers and their respective ideas,” says Matthew Higgs, who curated the section. “Just as you have the figure of the artists’ artist, Hudson was like an art dealers’ art dealer. I was

concerned that people would forget his contributions. This was an opportunity to remind people that art doesn't appear out of nowhere.”

Trends were not Hudson's thing. “What was extraordinary about Hudson was that he created this context for all kinds of maverick, iconoclastic, idiosyncratic artists who might otherwise have remained [professionally] homeless,” says Higgs, who is director and chief curator of White Columns, a non-profit exhibition space in New York.

Higgs cites two examples: Charles Ray, whose often lifelike sculptures can be dark and unsettling, and Tom of Finland, whose sexually explicit, homoerotic drawings were barrier-breaking. “Hudson had a prescient eye — 20 years ahead of the curve. At the time he was showing it, it really seemed out there. Over time, he created art history. It's a living history.”



Andrew Masullo's '6039' (2014-16), made in memory of Hudson © Andrew Masullo/ Nicelle Beauchene gallery

The Frieze section coincides with the launch of the Feature Hudson Foundation, whose aim is to promote the research and exhibition of the gallery's art and archives.

A former contemporary dancer and performance artist who had managed arts organisations, Hudson opened his gallery in 1984 in Chicago with a Richard Prince show.

He mounted Jeff Koons's second solo show — though he sold none of the now iconic “Equilibrium” sculptures of basketballs suspended in glass and steel tanks of distilled water — and brought the work of other future stars, including Sherrie Levine and [Mike Kelley](#), to the city. He was also an early publisher of the humorist David Sedaris.

Four years later, he moved the gallery to New York. Feature Inc criss-crossed Lower Manhattan over the years, perhaps to its detriment, as it struggled financially at times. Commerce wasn't necessarily Hudson's strong suit; he once gave away — first come, first served — hundreds of artworks in an anti-commodification rampage that offered “free art: one piece per person, please”. Higgs says Hudson saw his role as a kind of “cultural philanthropy”.

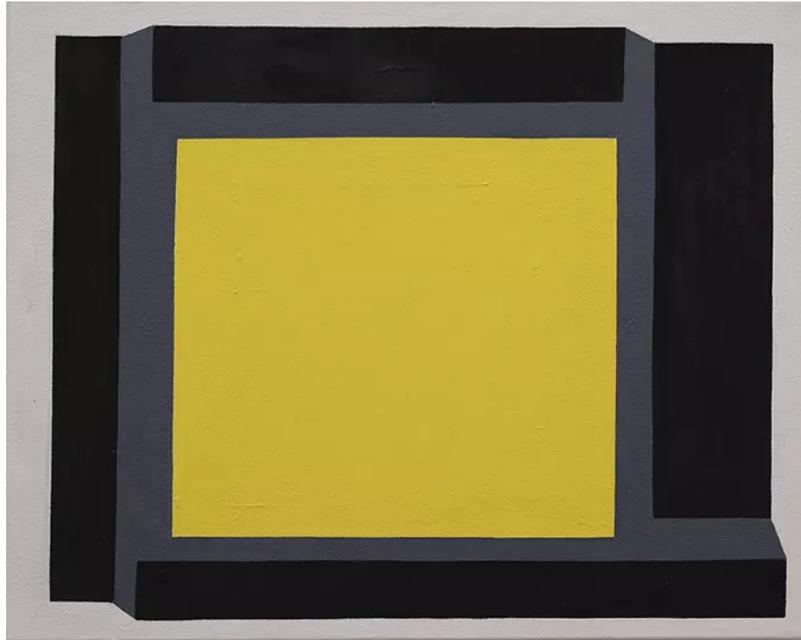
“He trained as an artist,” says Higgs. “His chosen medium was an art gallery. It was an ongoing work by Hudson.”

When Feature's artists achieved a certain level of acclaim, they often left for bigger galleries that offered more money and more extensive collector networks. For his part, Hudson stuck by his artists if he believed in them. “We did not do very well with sales,” says Wurtz, a sculptor. “But he always stood by my work. He remained in business without a backer,” Wurtz adds, “so he must have done something right.” And financial matters aside, “everyone paid attention to Feature”.

Wurtz joined Feature when it was still in Chicago. He left for Metro Pictures about seven years ago, when Feature was between spaces and Wurtz felt the need to show. At Frieze, Wurtz — whose sculptures, constructed of humble materials, have a whimsical, DIY feel — will exhibit a new wall piece made of plywood, with wire, shoelace and plastic lids.

“You know what, I think Hudson would really like it,” he says. “When I finished it, I thought I could really have seen Hudson putting it in a show.”

It is a matter of debate whether Hudson was approachable. Wurtz says he eschewed “salesman” talk and despite a distant air spoke eloquently about art. He did not tiptoe. When artists submitted slides of their work in the hopes of gaining representation, Wurtz says, “he would always write letters — sometimes scathing letters — in response. But people appreciated that they weren't form letters.”



Masullo's '5956' (2014), made in memory of Hudson © Andrew Masullo/ Nicelle Beauchene gallery

Artist Andrew Masullo recalls going into Feature frequently but never working up the nerve to introduce himself to Hudson, though he sat in the front, out in the open. “I don’t know any gallery owner who sits at the front desk. Not a comfortable front desk, either,” Masullo says. “He wanted to know what was going on. That was his baby. Are you going to plant a beautiful garden and sit in the wood shed?”

After about 10 years, Masullo, by then living in San Francisco, finally sent him images using snail mail, as he did roughly 60 galleries. Hudson was one of three or four who responded, and Masullo joined Feature shortly thereafter. New York’s Nicelle Beauchene Gallery is devoting its Frieze booth to his quirky, colourful, non-objective canvases, typically small enough to hold in your lap. The centrepiece, Masullo says, will be a yellow, grey, black and white painting he made in Hudson’s memory. The other dozen or so works all have black and white in their palettes. “It’s sort of a memorial booth, not that anyone would know it was funereal,” Masullo says. “The bright yellow centre — the bright light — that’s Hudson.”

He plans to install the booth in Hudson’s style — that is, breaking the rules, with the bigger pictures crowded together on a small wall, the smaller canvases hung farther apart on a big wall. “He was not normal, and he did not want to be normal,” Masullo says. “He was aware of the ridiculousness of life.” Hudson even came around to liking art fairs.

Hudson’s modus operandi was to stand back and get out of his artists’ way. Although Masullo says Hudson never pushed him in any particular direction, he credits the gallerist with being his “accompaniment” before his death. “I remember I told him I wanted to do a show of masterpieces,” Masullo says. “He said, ‘You know, there’s nothing wrong with a good painting.’”