

MAUREEN PALEY. 21 Herald Street, London E2 6JT
telephone: + 44 (0)20 7729 4112 fax: + 44 (0)20 7729 4113
email: info@maureenpaley.com web: www.maureenpaley.com

Martin, Penny, *Maureen Paley*,
Cos Magazine, Autumn-Winter 2011, pp.62-67.



Martin, Penny, *Maureen Paley*,
Cos Magazine, Autumn-Winter 2011, pp.62-67.

ART

London, United Kingdom, 2011
Text Penny Martin
Photography Paul Wetherell

27 years ago, Maureen Paley set up her home gallery in a gritty area of east London, as far removed from the city's commercial art district as one could imagine. Three decades on and the art world has come east — such is the influence of this pioneering gallerist and the amazing roster of modern artists she has nurtured into greatness. Maureen is an excellent host, a role in life she much prefers to being a guest.

maureen paley

Martin, Penny, *Maureen Paley*,
Cos Magazine, Autumn-Winter 2011, pp.62-67.

MAUREEN

It's a balmy summer's evening at the Camden Arts Centre in north London and Maureen Paley is about to round off a series of pre-dinner speeches. Quietly smiling her way through all the mutual thanking, she is the picture of art-world elegance: petite and slim, dressed in her signature all-black uniform. Tonight this consists of a long, fine-knit cardigan worn over lace leggings, with mid-height, chisel-toe shoes. Her jewellery looks chic and expensive and would inspire further inspection but for the fact that all eyes are drawn to that hairdo, the sleek beehive-cum-ponytail that seems to get taller every year. It's a very singular look that, like Warhol's wig, transcends age. Deriving from her teenage dance training with an instructor from the Russian ballet, it's become Maureen's unique identifier at the many international art fairs, parties and cultural events where she's to be found.

We're in Camden to mark the conclusion of a residency by one of the artists she represents, Anne Hardy, whose activity in the previous three months has produced a vivacious installation, on view in the gallery upstairs. Before Maureen gracefully rises to welcome the various curators, collectors, friends and artists who've gathered to dine on the delicious beetroot salad and monkfish stew she selected for the occasion, she discreetly arranges that each of us receive a generous flute of prosecco, with which we exuberantly toast the artist. Though Maureen raises her glass as enthusiastically as the rest of us, never in the course of the ensuing evening does the fizzy aperitif actually pass her lips. It just sits there, going flat, long past the point where chocolate and raspberry tart is served.

Sitting in the office on the ground floor of her immaculately white East End gallery the following day, Maureen cracks open a bottle of Hildon mineral water and I ask her if she makes it a rule not to drink while on duty. "Oh, no," she says in a soft, even purr that betrays her East Coast American origins. "I was forced to stop drinking through illness some years ago. I had German measles, Rubella, which you're *really* not supposed to get as an adult, so I now have to be very careful. And I really didn't wish to stop. I really, really liked my vodka."

As with most things Maureen commits to, she is something of a connoisseur. "I started off on Stolichnaya when I was younger — I was drawn to its very modernist label — then Ketel One, Grey Goose; Moscow Mules or Bloody Marys at the St. John. Or neat. A little shot, very chilled. It's a very pure spirit, or so I believed, so I would stick to it throughout my meal, as the one thing I would drink all night. Afterwards, I would feel weakened but never hungover. I mean," she continues, "it wasn't as if I had some out-of-control relationship with alcohol, but I was completely

despondent about having to stop. Still am." Is that why she still has a glass poured even though she never intends to drink it? "No. You see, a large part of my work is hosting and attending social occasions, and I really want people to enjoy themselves, without feeling observed or judged. I see that it makes them far more comfortable if the drink is poured, and since people are drinking, they don't notice when I don't. I like it when everything looks seamlessly connected; if I can lift a drink to my lips, not touch it and then put it down again, at least I can be participating in the occasion."

Providing a seamless context in which other people can enjoy themselves and be enjoyed might sound like a curiously post-industrial kind of work, but over the last two decades it has come to be the most coveted of all occupations. Curators are the new pop stars of our time. As the film critic Mark Kermode has observed, any attractive, remotely intelligent female character featured in a movie released over the past five years inevitably turns out to work in an art gallery. And as we know, we're all curators now. Fashion bloggers 'curate' their shoe collections and the US high-street fashion brand J.Crew introduced the 'curator pant' earlier this year — a three-quarter-length pair of trousers fashioned from matte jersey. The popular job title has been democratised out of all meaning.

But there are 'curators' and there are *curators*, and it was visionaries like Peggy Guggenheim, Denise René, Barbara Gladstone and Maureen Paley who wrote the original job description. When Maureen, the sparky young photography postgraduate from New York, set up her home gallery Interim Art in 1984, in a part of the borough of Hackney now famous for its burgeoning Broadway Market, the area was not the hipster Mecca it is today. And there was certainly no commercial East End art scene to speak of. Maureen's project space was situated in a shabby 19th-century row of workers' cottages owned by the ACME Art Collective, an organisation formed by artists to create affordable live/work spaces through buying and renovating low-cost property. Maureen launched a progressive curatorial programme and aesthetic on London that was as far from the conservative, Mayfair-centred world of commercial art as was possible to imagine.

In the 27 years since, she's built a stable of star artists including Turner Prize winners Wolfgang Tillmans and Gillian Wearing, Rebecca Warren, Liam Gillick and James Welling, as well as a reputation for friendship and loyalty verging on the familial. "The people who come into my life tend to stay in my life," she says. "So when I commit to an artist, an idea or a place, it's with a notion of really staying with it, allowing it to grow, nurturing it. It's not something

Martin, Penny, *Maureen Paley*,
Cos Magazine, Autumn-Winter 2011, pp.62-67.

PALEY



Maureen is photographed here with
Rebecca Warren's 'Fascia III' (2010).
She's wearing her own black wool
winter coat from COS.

Martin, Penny, *Maureen Paley*,
Cos Magazine, Autumn-Winter 2011, pp.62-67.

MAUREEN

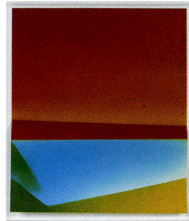


Fig. 1
Wolfgang Tillmans, *Lighter 84*, 2010



Fig. 2
Anne Hardy, *Untitled IV (balloons)*, 2005



Fig. 3
Anne Hardy, *Untitled VII*, 2007



Fig. 4
Gillian Wearing, *Self Portrait*, 2000

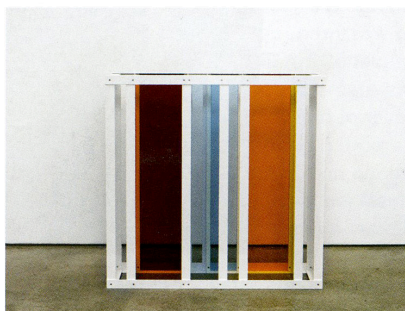


Fig. 5
Liam Gillick, *Restricted Centre*, 2010
All works presented here are courtesy of the artists
and Maureen Paley, London

Martin, Penny, *Maureen Paley*,
Cos Magazine, Autumn-Winter 2011, pp.62-67.

PALEY

I enter into lightly or trivially." What unites the many diverse practitioners Maureen has exhibited in her gallery, now titled plainly 'Maureen Paley' and since 1999 located down the road in Bethnal Green, is her preference for ideology over fashionability. She has never chased the latest trends. It is her steadfast adherence to relationships and substance that has consistently kept Maureen at the forefront of the field she helped create. "A lot of the people I'm interested in have a sense of social commitment; they're observationally engaged with how they believe the world appears. There's that Gertrude Stein quote, you know, 'It takes talent to recognise genius.' Everyone is the sum total of what they've looked at and a large part of my work is in travelling to absorb interesting things from let's say LA, New York, Berlin, Amsterdam, Torino, Rome. This ensures I build up a world view from which to create the possibilities."

The dynamic is also intensely personal. "I think to spot someone truly modern with staying power, there has to be some kind of connection, which is probably greater than the sum of its parts. I had it with Wolfgang, I had it with Anne, and I had it with Rebecca and Gillian and the others. It just strikes a chord; it's like: 'Yes, that's what I'm looking for, this is what I'm thinking about, that's what I'm wanting.' Rebecca showed me some Polaroids in the bar of the St. John and said, 'I was going to do some things with this clay work, what do you think?' And I saw in these pictures just what I was thinking of showing. I hadn't seen anyone making work like that and it was a perfect combination of this charismatic person and their work. It was like: 'Yeah, we should do something. It's a kind of marriage, a kind of falling in love.'"

Despite having built a thriving business on her ability to identify new talent and anticipate the more sustainable aspects of the art market, Maureen cautiously avoids making predictions. She says it's only in the past five years she's really seen the investment she made by remaining loyal to the area pay off – no less than 134 galleries participated in the latest 'First Thursdays' guided tour of the East End. These days, she says she prefers to think of herself as *of* her time, rather than ahead of it. "When you're too far ahead, running out on your own, you just don't have time to fully enjoy the moment you're in. If I look at the roster I had in the mid-'80s-to-'90s, I was showing people like Christian Marclay, Fischli and Weiss, Charlie Ray, and I knew that they were going to be interesting and have longevity. They may not have been part of my full

story, but they did inform how I was able to pick up people like Wolfgang, Gillian and Rebecca. Really growing with those artists in the last decade has allowed both me personally and the gallery space to flourish, to go to greater depths."

It's through these choices – whom and whom not to commit to, or what and what not to do together – that Maureen lives her life to the fullest. "What I call work, living this movable feast with the artists, enjoying their personalities, travelling with them, it comes with unique privilege. If the painter David Salle comes to London, one wants to make sure that he'll enjoy hanging out at Shoreditch House, or that I know where he might like to go in the West End. Or taking him on the Eurostar to the Musée d'Orsay to view a Manet that he adores. It's my job to ensure that my artists feel entertained or excited, that their comforts are met as much as their intellectual needs. I really pride myself on the little black book I've built up."

I ask Maureen what it feels like for the revolutionary – the former punk who attended Sex Pistols gigs and set up a gallery in what most contemporary collectors probably regarded as a squat – to have finally become the paradigm? The experience has taught her the virtue of patience, she says. "Better to wait and find it's not a hollow victory. This area, the East End, is now connected to many others, internationally; it's fascinating the way that the geography is shrinking, joining, feeling closer than ever." This success isn't necessarily contrary to the early punk spirit, she adds; it's more that the acts have changed. Last December, she took the office to London's O2 Arena to see Lady Gaga for their Christmas night out.

And when will the Grande Dame who's made it her life's work to support and nourish other people finally give in to a bit of comfort herself? Maureen insists on a few necessary luxuries, she says. She takes taxis everywhere and she sees the renowned facialist Eve Lorn personally. And recently she got a house by the sea in Hove. But she still uses it to entertain friends and provide her artists with a space for relaxation. "I do enjoy it, but it's come gradually and correctly; only as a by-product of my other commitments. Now I see that the combination of the two ways of life has actually softened me and allowed a creativity to come out that has been useful – and very wonderful actually. But I had to come to it in my own time. If you'd asked me earlier 'Would I do this?' I'd have been really strident, 'Absolutely not! What are you talking about, are you trying to retire me?'" Perish the thought.