

Welcome the Emperor King

DALLAS ART FAIR EXHIBITOR KEIJSERS KONING MOVES TO RIVER BEND.

INTERVIEW BY FRANK HETTIG



Left: Jeff Grant, *Withershins*, 2021, lamp with florescent light bulb, toy animals, diameter 12 in. height varies.; Right: William Burton Binnie, *Untitled (Lamp)*, 2019, ink and gesso on paper, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of Keijsers Koning.

Frank Hettig, Heritage Auctions' vice president of modern and contemporary art, caught up with Bart Keijsers Koning the newest member of the Dallas gallery scene.

Frank Hettig (FH): *You started your gallery 15-plus years ago in New York: why did you choose to move it to Dallas?*

Bart Keijsers Koning (BK): My wife, Louky Keijsers Koning, started LMAKprojects in 2005, and I joined a few years into the venture. We had two locations: one in Williamsburg and the other in Chelsea. Around 2007/8 we noticed something happening on the Lower East Side. We consolidated into one space and joined Envoy Enterprises and Feature in their respective moves to the area, as well as James Fuentes, who was one of the earliest settlers. Anyway, prior to the pandemic I had started noticing another change, but this was more within NYC, and I started to think about different cities. To quote Jimi Dams (Envoy Enterprises), "It wasn't fun anymore".

The pandemic brought a few changes. Louky changed her focus and became the director of the estate of Barbara Hammer. I was looking for a location that would work better for me, my artists, and offers the gallery an interesting and supportive arts community. [I was] heavily influenced by Texas natives Joanne Cassullo and William Burton Binnie, who's one of my artists, and Kelly [Cornell] and Sarah [Blagden] of the Dallas Art Fair, who have created a great environment for gallerists, artists, and collectors in Dallas. I enjoy the combination of curiosity and knowledge that I experience among them.

FH: *Why did you invest money in a physical gallery when many art lovers are now so used to collecting online via virtual vs. actual exhibitions?*

BK: (Chuckles) Well let's not question the sanity of my decision. I can only speak for myself and not the art world at large or individual cases, but there are a couple of reasons why I think spaces are

important to my artists and me. It is essential to have a space outside of the studio where the work can exist, be formulated and edited prior to the "crowning" or context of a museum. This space should allow for the initial encounter with an audience and, though the narrative of the work may be formalized, the exchange can still be formed. Plus, having multiple shows in a space allows for an understanding of the legacy an artist wants to form.

I love putting shows together with the artists, most of them, and presenting it to the audience. I saw the opportunity to do this in Dallas, where the art scene is developing and growing.

FH: *What changes have you seen in the gallery business in the last two years?*

BK: The art world, or at least the gallery world, is the behemoth that doesn't like to move or change. We could see it when we had the introduction of the internet and websites; galleries were the last to get on board. So I don't think we have seen the beginning of a profound change quite yet. However, I think there are a few things that are starting to show through the troubled water from the past two years. The audience has become more accustomed to the virtual, but they are also understanding the difference of each impression—i.e. the virtual and real life. The synergy that you can experience while standing in front of a work of art cannot be replaced, but with the virtual I can lay down the groundwork for a future encounter, be it through a fair or setting up an in-person viewing.

What we haven't seen the results or consequence of yet is the global reflection on our presence and perseverance within our own life. I'm curious to see what happens when we all press the global start button again and get out of this limbo, paused state.

FH: *You have such a Dutch last name; how did you start in the art/gallery business?*

BK: Born and raised in Maastricht, the Netherlands till I was 11 and then moved around. My wife is Dutch as well; we've known each other since I was born. When we got married, we took words from each of our last names to create Keijsers Koning (much to the chagrin of the families)—it translates to “Emperor King.” How can you beat that?

As far as the gallery world, I ended up going to Columbia in Chicago for painting and worked at a gallery to see what the other side was about. It guided me to complete a minor in business before I left Chicago. I then completed my painting studies at SVA in NYC. I kept working in galleries, and as more responsibility came my way, I was able to funnel my creativity and understanding of art and art-making into the job.

FH: *You are opening your new space next to other galleries like PDNB; 12/26; Erin Cluley; and the headquarters of the Dallas Art Fair, where their project space is located. Was the cluster of galleries also a reason to locate to Dallas?*

BK: I was looking at a few spaces, but when I got a call from Jeremy Buonamici at Brook Partners that there was a space available within the heart of it all...it wasn't rocket science. I think being within a community and allowing for an exchange is always good. The galleries I have the privilege to be surrounded by all have an independent and driven program, and you can wander from one space to the next.

FH: *Besides the direct community, how important are art fairs to you?*

BK: I think fairs are important. They allow me to reach an audience that may not be acquainted with my program as well as meet some of my collectors on their turf. It is an additional platform, but it does not work for all artworks, and due to its financial risk, you do make certain decisions.

FH: *To be a good gallerist, do you also need to be a good diplomat? How important is trust/friendship and connection between artist, gallerist, and collectors?*

BK: As a person who frequently puts his foot in his mouth, I have certainly learned to be more subtle. However, I do think a gallerist also needs to have an opinion. You are an editor that allows for the language of the artist to be presented in the best and clearest tone. It is a collaboration, and it is your responsibility to present the work true to its form. This allows you to give a clear reflection on the work for the collector and allows them to support it with a clear heart and mind—they become custodians of the work. We have never been able to exist without one another, and just like a scale, one shouldn't pander to the other, but strike a balance of responsibility and role.

FH: *As a smaller gallery, are you afraid that artists will go to bigger galleries even though you discovered some at an early stage and invested time and money to promote and expose them?*

BK: It has happened a few times. It can sting, but it is also a compliment, as these exchanges don't go unnoticed by collectors. I do think you become savvier over the years, in particular about your investments of money and time. Being in Dallas also allows me to show artists I couldn't show in NYC due to the gallery affiliations, etc., so the knife cuts many ways.

Frank, thank you for your time, and it was pleasure to meet a fellow European in Dallas!

Keijsers Koning is located at 150 Manufacturing Street, suite 201. The gallery is set to open on February 11 with *Murmur*, featuring the work of Jeff Grant and William Burton Binnie. **P**



Top: Bart Keijsers-Koning. Courtesy of Keijsers Koning; Above: Kaloki Nyamai, *Untitled (Detail)*, 2021, acrylic and mixed media on canvas stitched together, 79 x 79 in. Courtesy of Keijsers Koning; Left: Popel Coumou, *Untitled (121)*, 2020, C-print, Edition 5, 51 x 34.25 in. Courtesy of Keijsers Koning.