

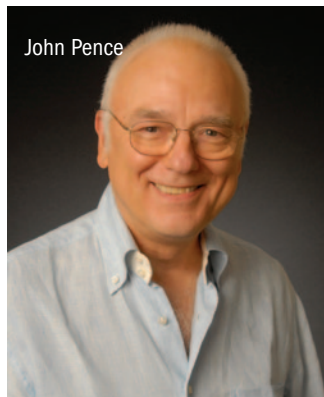
John Pence

Championing Realist Art — and Artists

BY KELLY COMPTON



John G. Pence likes a challenge. Back in 1975, when conceptualism and minimalism dominated the art scene, Pence decided to open a gallery near San Francisco's Union Square that specialized in realist art. It was an unusual choice, but Pence proved remarkably prescient. Selling realism is still not easy, but the world has clearly caught up to his keen eye over the past 36 years.



John Pence

The decision to open a gallery of any kind was equally unorthodox in the context of Pence's career to that time. Born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 1936, he earned a B.A. in political science and economics from Wabash College. Pence was immediately commissioned as a naval officer, rising to the rank of lieutenant commander within nine years. After two years teaching at the United States Naval Academy, he served as a social aide to President and Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson at the White House, and also earned a M.S. in government from American University in Washington, D.C. From 1968 through 1974, he worked as an economist and international negotiator for Trans World Airlines in New York, and then at the International Air Transport Association in Geneva.

John Pence Gallery has long been San Francisco's largest, encompassing more than 8,000 square feet of exhibition space. Although its inventory goes back to the late 19th century, the emphasis is firmly on living American realists, whom Pence describes as "humanists dedicated to capturing the beauty of people, nature, our surroundings, our possessions, our senses of humor, and ourselves." He represents many artists covered regularly in *Fine Art Connoisseur*, including Juliette Aristides, Michael Bergt, Jacob Collins, Sarah Lamb, Dean Larson, Steven J. Levin, Joseph McGurl, Clark Mitchell, Dorothy Morgan, Jacob A. Pfeiffer, Nick Reynolds, Randall Sexton, John Sisko, Patricia Watwood, and Will Wilson. This season (November 18-December 17) features a large show of works by Kate Lehman and Travis Schlaht, who met at Jacob Collins's atelier and subsequently married.

One glance around John Pence's gallery makes evident a single dominant characteristic: consistent quality. "I am a stickler on consistent production from my artists," Pence explains, "consistency in the paint

quality, the subject's interest, and an ample variety of subjects." Yet he also delights in "his" artists' ability to surprise him with new and unusual images. "Just when I think I know what an artist will send me for a show, I'm dead wrong. Over the years, I have had the privilege of presenting more unusual subjects than most. These artists' creative spirits are a source of joy."

When reviewing potential candidates for representation, Pence insists on seeing at least 30 slides to ascertain if the work is of consistent



Travis Schlaht (b. 1975)

Open Plains

2011, Oil on canvas, 60 x 40 in.



Kate Lehman (b. 1968)
Roman
 2011, Bronze, 33 x 13 x 14 in.

The dealer sees the future, and sees the artist as part of it. There are new artists who appear on the scene every year who will eclipse present-day standard-bearers in time.”

As dedicated as Pence is to serving the needs and interests of his clients, his ambition has always been to create a gallery that serves artists, too. “Most artists are told to feel lucky if they find a dealer and a gallery,” he says, “but that kind of relationship generates little feedback or feeling of professional brotherhood. The great galleries of the past and present have been warm, effective collaborations between the artists, the dealer, and the clients — a meeting of the minds, creative and supportive.” Pence encourages his artists to interact by painting together, exchanging ideas, and discussing theories and counter-theories about art and our world.

Speaking of our world, Pence has always been eager to connect with those outside the art world by hosting fundraising events on behalf of various nonprofit organizations. Most significant to him is his presidency of the board of regents of the Point Foundation, which has been — for ten years now — underwriting college educations for outstanding gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students who otherwise could not attend due to financial need or abandonment by their families.

In its ongoing effort to acknowledge colleagues who have carried the torch of realism through the late 20th century, *Fine Art Connoisseur* has selected John Pence as one of four recipients of its inaugural Trailblazer Awards. By promoting nothing but work of the highest caliber, Pence has made a tremendous contribution to the field. He modestly insists, however, that his gallery’s success comes from the artists. “The reason the gallery draws so much attention from artists and collectors alike is that the artists are truly wonderful people,” he says. “I have to count my lucky stars and consider it a privilege to have been instrumental in the careers of many giant talents.” ■

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quality. He considers “several handfuls of artists” each year, and generally chooses one or two artists to introduce and nourish. “After their introductory shows, I then follow up with two or three solo shows in the first five or six years. That gives the artist legs.” He adds, “East Coast galleries have drawn upon our stable time and time again, which pleases me. But it is peculiar that many of the artists are right there on the East Coast, yet the galleries don’t seem to have time for these same artists until they have legs. John Pence Gallery has become a space for true talents to get their footing and commence a successful nationwide career.”

Pence often advises clients to acquire works of emerging artists in the early stages of their careers by buying them from a reputable gallery. He observes, “If the beginning artist is in a gallery surrounded by other accomplished, senior artists, there is a good reason the artist is there.



John Pence surrounded by six San Francisco artists he represents: Adam Forfang, Greg Gandy, Dean Larson, Will Wilson, Jeremy Mann, and Carl Dobsky