"What's exciting about a private gallery is you show what you want to, you put to the world the things you believe in"

Meet Carl Freedman

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The internationally renowned Carl Freedman Gallery may be new in town, but the owner is no stranger to Margate. Carl Freedman had been visiting decades earlier, having spent time here in the early 90s with Tracey Emin, her mum and nan in their flat on Northdown Road. It was around this time Carl had been carving out a role for himself, making waves as an entrepreneurial and nurturing figure for the community of burgeoning artists he found himself amongst

How did your life in art begin?

It was all a bit by accident. I was studying anthropology at University College London when a very good friend came down from Leeds to study art. I started hanging out with him and we began cooking up some plans to do together. He went on to become quite a well-known artist, called Damien Hirst.

Through Damien I started hanging out at Goldsmiths College. It was a very free-thinking creative environment. It was that kind of atmosphere of artists all being together in one place that I found attractive.

I was interested in the role of organising exhibitions, curating and presenting things from the start.

How did that evolve in to a career?

From the outset I had a very entrepreneurial side to me, straight away I was applying a business approach to working with those artists. We started to sell art. It all happened very naturally, there wasn't a big game plan.

I thought my relationship to having a creative business was quite a conceptual idea. It wasn't really driven by purely making profit, it was more driven by making a creative business. ▶

What are your plans as a gallerist in Margate?

To carry on with a programme of exhibitions very similar to as if we were in London, an international stable of artists we work with.

What's exciting about a private gallery is you show what you want to, you put to the world the things you believe in. The artwork comes more or less directly from the artist's studio and gets put on a wall as it is, then there's very little interpretation or mediation of that experience. What people want to make of the artworks is completely up to them.

What kind of artists do you work with?

The gallery works with a broad range of artists with a particular unusual practice that's not necessarily what is current.

We work with artists who are uncompromising. If they are somehow self-reliant or have incredibly strong motivation and they can't stop making things, that makes my relationship with them an easier one.

Tell us about your opening exhibition with Billy Childish.

In light of what I said about self-reliance, Billy is someone who has published all his own records and books, and until the last few years, made art without any support or much interest in his paintings for 30 years. He's probably one of the most self-reliant, self-motivated and possessed people, and we've been able to gather together an incredible body of work for the show. I like the idea that he is a local artist and has been in the area for all his working and creative life.

Carl Freedman with artist Billy Childish

Swimmer, 2018 by Billy Childish

I always thought part of having this space in Margate, and being engaged in the community in different ways, we would do other types of events as well. Billy is perfect for that. We are doing a gig with him in the theatre. There's also going to be a poetry reading and maybe a small live printing session.

Tell us about the building your gallery is in.

The whole site was a print works for over 100 years and is an accumulation of buildings. This building was the last one to be built in the 50s or 60s and it's an amazing grid of spaces. There's a rhythm to it.

What is it about Margate now that made you relocate here?

It was this building and the space it afforded. When I was first doing exhibitions in London there was so much more space. Docklands wasn't overly developed, Canary Wharf hadn't been built yet, empty buildings, undeveloped land, space for people to have studios, to live and to put on big exhibitions. Over the last 20 years all that space has slowly disappeared, artists have been pushed out to the fringes. ▶

How do you remember Margate?

Simply put, there was nowhere to get a cup of coffee. There was nowhere to go and do anything. We would just come down and go to a pub and that was it. It was somewhere we came down to for the night and left again.

Now there's somewhere you can have coffee, two or three places you can go for something to eat. These places have gone from surviving to thriving. There's a certain energy in Margate which is similar to the art community of the late 80s early 90s in London, which was collaborative and supportive. A place where you would bump into people, see people. Socialise with people.

How did you work with Tracey Emin?

When I first met Tracey she was at a crossroads with her art and frustrated with the contemporary conceptual art world. She had a much more traditional outlook and she felt that she couldn't connect with what was going on. She'd given up on making art and was just writing. We started having a relationship, and I guess I was involved in helping her shape some of her ideas, framed within conceptual art making but still very much "Tracey".

What is Counter Editions?

Counter Editions started as an early e-commerce business, making high quality fine art prints which were more accessible and affordable. When we launched you could buy a Tracey Emin or Peter Doig for £250-300.

I've never had a print studio before, so one big thing about moving to Margate was setting one up. The print studio director is Andrew Curtis who was the studio director of a leading London print studio. I didn't poach him, but I got very very lucky as he's called a master printer, and you only get that title after you've printed a certain number of hours.

We have two local people working in the print studio with him, and there will be more local people helping us run the gallery.

Finally, what do you love about Margate?

The beaches. Basically, you go for coffee, have lunch, then take the kids to the beach. Oh, and I love going to the Vue cinema to watch a film in the afternoon.

To find out about exhibitions and events at Carl Freedman Gallery sign up to the newsletter on their website carlfreedman.com or follow on Instagram @carlfreedmangallery