

The New York Times

A Gallery Sells Hunter Bidens. The White House Says It Won't Know Who's Buying.

Hunter Biden's works are being offered for as much as \$500,000 apiece; his art dealer said he would follow ethics guidelines that the Biden administration helped to develop.

By Graham Bowley and Robin Pogrebin

Published Aug. 13, 2021 Updated Sept. 13, 2021

The Georges Bergès Gallery has sat on a chic stretch of SoHo for six years now, a relatively little-known newcomer in a New York art world that has long been dominated by name-brand power brokers like Pace Gallery and Gagosian.

This summer, however, it has unexpectedly become one of the most talked about galleries in the nation, thanks to its plans to sell works by another relative newcomer to the art world: a fledgling artist who happens to be the son of the president of the United States.

The gallery is planning to sell 15 works by Hunter Biden, and is asking as much as \$500,000 apiece. The prices — which are high for a novice artist — have raised questions in Washington about whether the works might attract buyers seeking to curry favor with the Biden White House.

In response, the administration has helped to develop a set of ethics guidelines that call on the gallery to keep the identity of buyers and other details of the sales from both the artist and the administration.

Even though the art world is widely known for its secrecy and a lack of transparency, questions remain about how the arrangement will play out in practice.



A self-portrait by Hunter Biden. Hunter Biden and Georges Bergès Gallery

Mr. Bergès said that he believed the guidelines would work “just fine,” and that the anonymity of buyers could be preserved even though Hunter Biden plans to attend the openings of his shows, which are set to take place in a private studio in Los Angeles next month and then at the Bergès Gallery in New York in October.

“Obviously, artists have to attend their own opening — both openings will be ‘by invitation only’ and limited to friends and family,” Mr. Bergès said in response to written questions. “There will be no discussion of pricing and sales — that will be handled by the gallery at other times.” (Andrew Bates, a White House spokesman, said that neither the president nor first lady would attend the openings. The first lady, Jill Biden, has one of Hunter Biden’s pieces in her office.)

Mr. Bergès said that he had been attracted to Mr. Biden’s work for “its mastery of color and form, and most importantly, its authenticity.” He said that the struggles of Mr. Biden — who has spoken of grappling with drug addiction — come through in the work, and that “I saw a lot of the positive qualities that have defined his life in his art — the heroic journey that comes from stumbling and falling and then rising up; his art is full of hope.”

CRISTIN TIERNEY

The prices Mr. Bergès has said he is seeking for Mr. Biden's works — between \$75,000 for works on paper and up to \$500,000 for large-scale works — are high for a new artist, even one with a well-known name, several art experts said.

"It's an eyebrow raiser," said Cristin Tierney, a New York gallerist. "I have artists who have very real careers who might not sell that much in dollar terms cumulatively over 10 years."



Hunter Biden at his studio in Los Angeles. Elizabeth Weinberg for The New York Times

Experienced collectors are typically looking to buy pieces by artists whose work has been vetted by more established galleries, museums or the marketplace. Investor-oriented buyers also want paintings or sculptures that are likely to appreciate in value over time.

"I don't think there has been any discussion in the market at all about Hunter Biden — he doesn't seem to be on the radar of any collectors or market makers or specialists I've been speaking to," said Edward Dolman, the chief executive of Phillips auction house. "There is some value in celebrity, but at the end of the day, the quality of the art tends to dictate how the market relates to it."

CRISTIN TIERNEY

Many public figures have tried their hands at art — including leaders such as George W. Bush, Winston Churchill and Jimmy Carter, along with Hollywood stars like Sylvester Stallone, Jim Carrey and Anthony Hopkins — but the art world rarely takes their work seriously.

“It’s sort of insulting to the art ecosystem, as if anyone could do it,” Lisa Schiff, a New York art adviser, said of the Biden example.

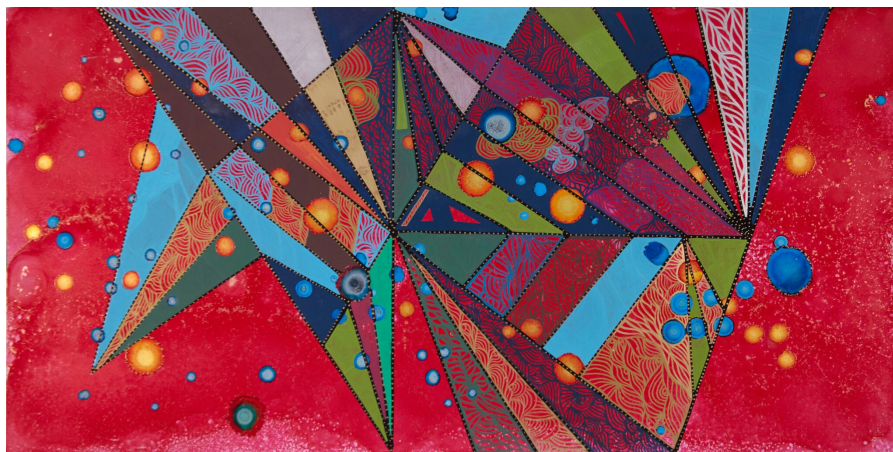
Asked about the prices, Mr. Bergès said that he had been guided by his experience. “Ultimately, the market will decide, but it’s my job to foster an artist’s career, and price is never the sole determinant of an artist’s value,” he said. “I believe Hunter’s art is special — it has a profound energy that for me brings hope, and assurances for a better future; and I ask myself, how much is that worth to you?”

Mr. Biden recently told the *Nota Bene* podcast that he had no role in determining the prices and no financial expectations, saltily dismissing critics. “I’d be amazed if my art had sold for \$10,” he said, noting that prices are “completely subjective.”

But the sale has opened a debate about whether the president’s son is trying to make money off his last name, and whether his art could be a window of influence into the Biden administration.

“We have a situation in which the White House is essentially giving a private gallerist that no one has ever heard of a political position,” said Joan Kee, an art history professor at the University of Michigan.

Hunter Biden’s efforts at a private career have already placed him under scrutiny, especially from his father’s political opponents. Former President Donald J. Trump’s request for foreign help to investigate Hunter Biden’s role with a Ukrainian gas company, Burisma, set Mr. Trump’s first impeachment in motion.



Part of a two-sided untitled Hunter Biden work featuring mixed media on sheet metal. Hunter Biden and Georges Bergès Gallery

And Hunter Biden disclosed in December that the U.S. attorney’s office in Delaware was investigating his “tax affairs,” adding that he was confident that it would find he had acted “legally and appropriately.”

Some critics said there is still the appearance, at least, that he is benefiting financially because of his connection to the president, and suggested that the Biden White House should do more, especially since it has vowed to set a far higher bar on ethics following the experience of the Trump years. (An investigation by *The New York Times* revealed that over 200 companies, special-interest groups and foreign governments patronized Mr. Trump’s properties while reaping benefits from him and his administration.)

“We just spent four years watching people dining at the Trump Hotel because that would effectively make the president happy,” said Jessica Tillipman, the assistant dean for government procurement law at George Washington University Law School. “When you have a subjective field like art, where there is no norm when it comes to prices and a reputation for laundering money, this is where it calls for more transparency, not less.”

But the White House has said that its arrangement to erect a wall of anonymity between the president and his son’s art career will ensure that collectors are not buying influence as well as art.

CRISTIN TIERNEY

“I think it would be challenging for an anonymous person who we don’t know and Hunter Biden doesn’t know to have influence,” Jen Psaki, the White House press secretary, told reporters at a briefing last month. “So that’s a protection.”

Mr. Bergès said the confidentiality of purchasers was standard, and that “artists never know who the actual buyer of the work is for obvious reasons — one of them being so that the gallery isn’t bypassed in future sales.”

But in fact, artists are often informed of — and may have a say in — where their work is placed.

The administration has said it is confident that the guidelines, which the White House Counsel’s Office helped develop, would prevent people from citing a purchase of Hunter Biden’s art as proof of ties to the administration. Administration officials would be discouraged from ever working with any buyer who went public with information about a purchase, a person familiar with the plan said.

Mr. Bergès said he met Hunter Biden about two years ago through a mutual collector friend; he would not say whether any of Mr. Biden’s work had sold yet.



Georges Bergès said that he had been attracted to Mr. Biden’s work for “its mastery of color and form, and most importantly, its authenticity.” Steve Benisty

Mr. Bergès started his gallery in SoHo in 2015 and said that he worked as a dealer before that. He also has a space in Berlin, he said, and is planning to expand to Los Angeles and Mexico City. He is not a member of the Art Dealers Association of America. The 20 artists on his website include Todd Williamson, who had an installation at the Venice Biennale in 2019, and Laddie John Dill, whose work is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. Most are not well-known.

The Biden sale has put Mr. Bergès under scrutiny from outside the art world. Fox News ran a report about his ambitions in China. His gallery was vandalized when an artist and documentary filmmaker spray painted the word “Daddy” backward on a gallery wall.

CBS News reported that in 1998, Mr. Bergès, while still a student, was arrested in California on charges of assault with a deadly weapon and “terrorist threats,” citing records from the Santa Cruz Police Department. Mr. Bergès said through a spokeswoman that the most significant charges were dismissed and that he ended up pleading no contest to a misdemeanor threat charge for what was described as a dispute with a male roommate. A few months after the arrest, CBS reported, he filed for personal bankruptcy.

Asked about these events, Mr. Bergès said: “I was a kid; we all make mistakes. Hopefully, we learn from them and do better going forward. I know that’s what I did.”

In 2016, Mr. Bergès was sued in New York federal court for fraud and breach of contract by an artist who, the lawsuit said, had invested \$500,000 in the gallery. Mr. Bergès’s spokeswoman said he countersued for \$2.9 million, claiming defamation and breach of fiduciary duty among other things. The suit was settled in 2018.

“People get into disagreements, as humans do,” Mr. Bergès said. “It is noteworthy that this has been the only disagreement that led to a lawsuit in my entire career, which in this industry is pretty remarkable when you look at my peers.”

The Bergès Gallery’s website — featuring a black-and-white photo of a scruffy Mr. Biden with his fingers contemplatively at his temple — says that Mr. Biden’s paintings “range from photographic to mixed-media to abstract works on canvas, yupo paper, wood and metal. He incorporates oil, acrylic, ink and the written word to create unique experiences that have become his signature.”

Mr. Bergès said that he was impressed by the way Mr. Biden works in different mediums. “Hunter approaches his art fearlessly, and you can’t blame him when you see everything that he has gone through and survived,” he said.

But some art experts suggested that Mr. Biden’s skill has some distance to go. “He does seem to be absorbing the technical lessons of certain artists,” Ms. Tierney said, “but has not yet found a unique voice.”

On the gallery’s website, Hunter Biden’s bio describes him as “a lawyer by profession” who “now devotes his career to the creative arts.” It makes no mention of his father.

Additional reporting by Zolan Kanno-Youngs, Adam Popescu and Julia Jacobs.