

An Interview with Gallery Owner and Art Dealer **Bruce Silverstein** By Chassey Reyes, CDP Alumni



Bruce Silverstein and Chassey Reyes at Silverstein's Gallery

Bruce Silverstein is a respected art dealer, gallery owner, and one of the most active members of CAE's Board of Directors. In addition to board responsibilities, Silverstein has hosted a Career Development Program (CDP) intern at his Chelsea gallery each semester since Fall 2005. Through this program, promising public high school students are matched with internships in a variety of creative industries to help them discover the many arts-related career opportunities available to them, as well as a bit about life.

Silverstein's intern from the Spring 2007 term, **Chassey Reyes**, just started her freshman year at the Fashion Institute of Technology as an advertising major with a photography minor. Chassey recently sat down with Silverstein to discuss his unusual career path, his interest in working with CAE, and what he has learned from the mentoring experience.

REYES: How did you get involved with CAE?

SILVERSTEIN: My opportunity to give back to the community had been limited in the past. Before opening the gallery I was doing a lot of volunteer work. Once I started the gallery that stopped and over the years I longed for opportunities to do something that I have a passion for. There are many different organizations out there, and while many are worthy, there was nothing I felt personally connected to. When I came upon CAE and learned about their mandate it really resonated with me, especially in terms of my personal experience. It seemed like a really good fit and I enjoy working with people that are all passionate about the cause.

REYES: Why do you feel the need to give something back to the New York City public schools?

SILVERSTEIN: The notion of the "arts program" has been endangered in New York City public schools. What attracted me to CAE is that they support arts programs in our public schools, which raises the quality of education. As parents, with a son going to a New York City public school, part of what we looked for is a school that offered an arts program and we were fortunate to find one. But to know that some schools may be cutting back on arts programs is disheartening.

REYES: And this interest runs in the family?

SILVERSTEIN: Yes, my father was a photographer who went to New York City public schools. I was raised in a very artistic family who passionately supported the arts community in Connecticut, where I grew up, and felt strongly that I should have an education in arts, not just in school but also out of school.

REYES: Coming from such an artistic family, why did you initially choose a career on Wall Street rather than pursue something in the arts?

SILVERSTEIN: Growing up, I was constantly doing creative things, including drawing and sculpting. I was very serious and passionate about it. When I graduated from school, my parents sat me down and explained how they struggled with their careers and said, "Since you have pretty good grades maybe you should consider doing something else and do art in your free time." So I ended up studying math and economics, and combining those skills with my creative

background. It turned out to be a pretty good combination in terms of my future. Because artists raised me, I learned very early to survive even under fairly adverse conditions.

REYES: Was it your career plan to start off at Wall Street and then become a gallery owner?

SILVERSTEIN: I never imagined that I would end up being a gallery owner. While on Wall Street I thought I could use my free time to create art but it just wasn't possible because there was never free time! There was no time where I could feel emotionally open to investing myself into the artistic process. But throughout that time, I was collecting photography, something I learned from my parents at a young age. They really supported the idea that photography deserved to be respected far more than it was at that time and that there was tremendous work out there that was not valued. When I started on Wall Street, I became more serious about it and learned more about the industry so that I could help represent my father. What started out as a curiosity really grew into something greater.

REYES: Were there any frustrations when you started your gallery?

SILVERSTEIN: I did things in a non-traditional way. I had the benefit and detriment of starting with no experience. I made a few lucky decisions early on. For example, when I first opened, I chose a smaller space on 22nd Street rather than a larger one in a different neighborhood and from that my education process grew rapidly. I had no idea how important that location would turn out to be. Also, by being alone in that space I really focused on enjoying the process of learning and working with my hands. I did everything in the gallery from painting the walls to designing my website! It was long hours but I had never enjoyed anything more.

REYES: It seems those tedious things you did for you gallery on, your own, were a validation of your passion in art?

SILVERSTEIN: I think it's a combination of things. One thing I learned from my last career was to focus more on the process—enjoy it. Working with my hands again was such a grounding experience and it made me feel young again! Although having a gallery is not creating art, I do believe that one can create a gallery *artfully*.

REYES: What are you developing with CAE for the Chelsea art community?

SILVERSTEIN: We are developing a display campaign for members of the Chelsea gallery community to let visitors know that they can support CAE and its mission. One of the areas where I can bring in value for CAE is by getting the message out—not only to those who should care, but also to those who have the ability to influence. It just makes sense that of all residents in New York City that should be vehemently supportive of CAE, it should be those that are fully vested in the arts. Those who really understand the value and benefits of art education and exposure to art. Here in New York City, we have perhaps the largest community of art-oriented industries and galleries. Many who live in the City have kids here and they should offer significant support for CAE. What I'd like to do is focus my effort on increasing the exposure of CAE, building relationships in the arts community, and looking for areas to bring in those who want to participate in that process.

REYES: As a CDP mentor, what have you learned from your interns?

SILVERSTEIN: You're the perfect example of that learning opportunity. When you first came to the gallery you were exceedingly shy. You worked very hard and now you have a remarkable sense of confidence that I can only associate with being a part of a group working environment and seeing that there's no magic in this. It's hard work for people who are passionate about it and it requires people respecting other people. I think that is the most fascinating aspect of how a three-month program can change someone and broaden his or her views of what opportunities are out there.

REYES: Your father influenced your interest in art. Would you consider him to be your mentor?

SILVERSTEIN: I think what he did was expose me to art. Even though we didn't have much money, he took me to so many museums and over time I learned a visual vocabulary that at a very young age is important. It's a known fact that children can pick up languages easier at a young age. I believe the same goes for understanding art, building up a vocabulary in art and being able to synthesize that information with some degree of background and critical analysis. I'm very grateful to my parents for exposing me to that and giving me a passion for it. I credit my father for giving me a sense of drive and desire to survive, while I credit my mother for giving me the guts. She was always one of those mothers that thought I could do anything. I never believed her until I got older.

REYES: Is there any advice you would give to future mentors and future interns?

SILVERSTEIN: My advice to mentors is to utilize their interns. It doesn't just help them; it helps the mentors and their organizations. Projects need to be assigned that are stimulating to interns AND that are productive for the organization. In the end, that's what people want to be—productive. They want to contribute. I think it's worthwhile to invest some time training the interns instead of sticking them into something easy so that nobody has to supervise. We have found that interns play a significant role in our ability to conduct the operations in the gallery. So don't think of it as just a favor; think of it as a two-way street.

My advice to the interns is not to underestimate the possibilities and benefits that can come out of a job well done. Don't underestimate the value of the relationships that are developed with people who have benefited from your hard work and your focus. Know that, in general, people want to help people they appreciate. Work hard and don't hyper-focus on what you're doing at a particular moment. Instead, focus on what you are able to accomplish during the entire internship. I would also advise them to listen, to ask questions, to look for areas that they think they might add value, and to know that they can make a difference.

REYES: If you were a photograph, which photographer would best capture your persona?

SILVERSTEIN: I feel in a way that I am like a magnifying glass. That when I look I constantly focus on everything, so a picture of me is more like a reflection. I would say Zoe Strauss, who we recently featured in a solo exhibition at the gallery, in terms of the way Zoe sees the world: it's close.