

Icons Of Impact: Art, Commerce And An 11-Year-Old Prodigy

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Aelita Andre, childhood art prodigy, showing her typical paint covered hands following a painting... [+] session at the age of seven. Her style is personal immersion in the painting.

Nikka Kalashnikova

Art Basel officially kicked off today with the world's wealthiest and most influential art dealers, celebrities, and collectors descending onto Miami Beach.

People come as much to don their shades and sip champagne as they do to shop the exquisite art showcased across 270 galleries. Last year's top sale, Bruce Nauman's *Untitled (Two Wolves, Two Dear)*, netted a breezy \$9.3 million with this year set to surpass that.

Art and commerce are timeless bedfellows. As Larry Fink, the CEO of BlackRock, famously quipped, "The two greatest stores of wealth internationally today is contemporary art ... and I don't mean that as a joke, I mean that as a serious asset class ... [and] apartments in Manhattan, apartments in Vancouver, in London."

Art is the new gold. It's one of our most powerful engines of wealth creation but its power is deeply concentrated – most often in the pockets of the ultra-wealthy purchasers and the few artists whose pieces fetch such wealth. Today, just 25 artists account for 50% of all contemporary auction sales.

Groups like Upstart Co-Lab are helping to pioneer impact investing in the arts and creative industries by partnering with LISC NYC, who recently launched an impact fund to back real estate projects that support affordable space for artists and creatives to grow and sustain their careers, provide quality jobs for low- and middle-income workers and enliven their communities.

But where do we go to find the next generation of artists who will be the ones to carry not just the passion forward but the vocation and wealth creation too? Look no further than Miami this week.

The first ever WONDER Kids' Basel Exhibit and Interactive Installation launched last night to a packed crowd of 450 people and kid artists who rival their adult peers. Ashley Sidman, Founder of WONDER Kids' Basel, calls it not just an art exhibition but a movement, "These are the voices of our future ... Our kids will succeed with their minds when we transform our curriculum to speak to their hearts. WONDER's initiative is to fund innovative curriculum designed to help kids navigate the complexities of the world."

The star of the show is a child artist prodigy named Aelita Andre. At just four years old, Aelita was dubbed a childhood genius by art critics and media around the world. Now at eleven years old, she's continuing to reshape the industry by merging sound with nature, art, and rapture. For my latest Icon of Impact series, I sat down with Aelita and her parents to learn what impact she's having on the powerful world of art.

Note: if you're in Miami this week and interested in seeing the exhibit, it runs from December 6 - 9 (info here).



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/imHBdvqA7xA>

Brendan Doherty: So first off, how old are you Aelita?

Aelita Andre: Eleven!

Doherty: And tell me again, where do you live now?

Andre: We're in Melbourne, Australia.

Doherty: Great. I'd love to start from the beginning, which for you is pretty recent history. How did you get started with painting and with making art? Where did it all begin for you?

Andre: My mom and my dad did a bit of art before I was born. And when I was really young, my dad laid down a canvas and he put his paints all in front of his canvas. He was about to paint but left the room to go get something. I just crawled onto the canvas and started playing with the tubes. That's how I started painting.

Doherty: So your knees were doing the painting?

Andre: I'm pretty sure – I was pretty much covered in paint. Thankfully, I didn't eat the paint.

Doherty: I love it. So how old were you?

Andre: I was 9 months old.

Doherty: By the time your dad came back into the room he was probably a bit surprised, thinking, "Oh god, my daughter just crawled across my entire canvas!" Do you remember this actually?

Andre: I don't know if such a small baby could, but I think I do – it's a quick one second memory but I think I remember myself painting that first time.

Doherty: Memory can work in mysterious ways. Bring us further along in your life – when did you first see that you had a gift and passion for art?

Andre: It's hard to tell because really it feels like it's been with me my entire life and is part of my lifestyle now. I've always thought of it as something that's just a part of me.

Doherty: The work that you're now creating today – its maturity and mastery – is unbelievable. Where do you get your inspiration?

Andre: My style slowly evolved but I always take inspiration directly from nature. I love everything about it – trees, animals, space, the cosmos – and also how we talk about atoms and the molecular level of it all. I also like the innocence of nature. Of course, nature is not totally innocent, but its overall beauty inspires me. I just think it's all amazing.

Doherty: Are there any masters or people that you look to for inspiration?

Andre: I love Carl Sagan and Neil deGrasse Tyson, how they both talk about the world. I love David Attenborough, Brian Cox, and Ian Stewart.

Doherty: Those are some pretty incredible people. I was just at the Grand Canyon over Thanksgiving and the stars at night are extraordinary. There's so little light pollution that you can see the night sky vividly. I appreciate why nature is such an inspiration for you.

What do your friends at your age think of your passion and talent with art?

Andre: Well they're my friends so they probably wouldn't say anything bad about it. But I think they like it. Lots of people say they like it. Some say it's okay, but overall my friends are supportive.

Doherty: Do adults react differently than children to your art?

Andre: Sometimes they'll say their kids can do it, the art that is. And they also have a more developed sense of what they like or don't like so they tend to have more mixed opinions.

Doherty: I think the work that you've created – at the age you created it with such a young gift – really sets you up as an original voice and artist. So it's curious to me to hear how different audiences respond, especially adults who may have a more critical eye.

What are you doing right now with art that's most exciting for you?

Andre: The exhibitions! I'm really excited to have an exhibition in Miami during Art Basel.

Doherty: And what about something that's exciting you that that has nothing to do with art?

Andre: Well I have animals and I love playing with them. And studying with my mom and dad, that's fun too. We have chickens, guinea pigs, rabbits, a turtle, and a buggee who says really weird things like, "The world's not for us, maybe next time." It's just weird and adorable and hilarious. We also have fish and an axolotl.

Doherty: It's like a small zoo. And that buggee, he's basically an existential philosopher bird. This is amazing. When do you feel inspired to paint? Is it daily or a certain time of day?

Andre: Sometimes I do it first thing in the morning and sometimes in the evening. It's usually every three or four days but there's time when I'll paint an entire week in a row. In my painting area, we have these glass doors that look out into our backyard. When the wind blows the trees move around and the sun also shines through the windows. I have a cracked looking bowl that reflects the light so that it looks like there's stars on my ceiling. My favorite time to paint is in the evening when the lights is like that and it this effect happens.

Doherty: Do you ever have the equivalent of writer's block, where you don't have an idea to paint?

Andre: People have asked me this and I actually never have an idea for what I'll do. It's one of my characteristics. It's as though I feel like I give the paint and materials to the painting, and then the painting makes everything itself. Like there's almost an energy field over the canvas and when the paint reaches that certain point, it gets twisted and becomes an amazing shape, or it becomes beautiful and the colors all weave together to create a swirl. I just feel that's what happens. I have a strange new style where I tip the canvas over slightly and it makes this beautiful running effect.

Doherty: It sounds like you channel energy. What do you want people to feel with your art?

Andre: I see lots of art. I go to art galleries and I see lots of sad art. [To her father] Wait dad, what was that one gallery with the soldiers and scary faces? The one with the skulls everywhere? There was this room with tons of skulls and whenever I see art, most of the time it doesn't have a happy atmosphere. I felt my art should be something that stays in your home and sends the message of happiness, that everything is safe.

Doherty: Right, to make people really experience that inside especially when the world feels like its filled with such challenges. You're doing lots of shows and selling your paintings. What do you do with the proceeds? Do you put it toward college, more art supplies, donating it to others?

Andre: In the exhibition in Miami, part of what we get will go to a charity, one that inspires and helps kids. And the part that we make mostly goes toward a farm at home in Australia. We all want one and will be so excited. And it'll have an art gallery too.

Doherty: Makes sense! In Australia, a lot of the coral reefs are deeply struggling from climate change. Do you hope that your paintings inspire people to want to solve some of these bigger challenges and protect the environment? Is that an important thing for you?

Andre: It's really important to me. I want to send a message that inspires people to save the environment and our world.



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