

Art Work

STEPHEN TALASNIK ON THE CHALLENGES OF MAKING A LIVING AS AN ARTIST. BY JONATHAN LOPEZ



I ONCE ASKED the New York dealer Stefan Stux what a young artist needed most in order to succeed. He replied, “Independent wealth.”

Stux was being humorous, but his comment contained a kernel of truth: Very few artists can support themselves solely through the sale of their work. And yet, there are some who manage to do it—not just the superstars, like Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons, but relatively unsung individuals who have, by dint of tireless effort, found a way to survive in the art world. Stephen Talasnik, 55, who has an exhibition of his paintings on view at the Marlborough Gallery in Chelsea through April 24, represents one such story of hard-won success. In conversation with *Art & Antiques*, he describes the life of a working artist.



From top: Studio portrait of artist Stephen Talasnik; *Modern Measurement*, 2009, mixed medium on wooden panel.

GROWING UP IN PHILADELPHIA, YOU SHOWED A TALENT FOR DRAWING AT A YOUNG AGE AND WERE ACCEPTED AT THE RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN RIGHT OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL. WHAT DID YOUR PARENTS SAY WHEN YOU TOLD THEM THAT YOU WANTED TO BECOME AN ARTIST?

TALASNIK: My father was not thrilled with the idea. He had to be convinced to let me go to RISD by my mom and my high school art teacher. He agreed on the condition that I get enough teaching credit so that I could teach in a high school. My parents were both products of the Depression and were not well off financially, so it was always important to have a job.

WHAT DID THEY DO FOR A LIVING?

TALASNIK: My dad sold televisions for Sears, Roebuck & Co. My mom had been a professional singer at one time. She sang with big bands before World War II and with the USO during the war, but she gave most of that up to raise a family.

YOU GRADUATED FROM RISD IN 1976 AND THEN GOT YOUR MFA FROM THE TYLER SCHOOL OF ART AT TEMPLE UNIVERSITY IN 1979. WHAT DID YOU DO WHEN SCHOOL ENDED AND YOU HAD TO ENTER THE REAL WORLD?

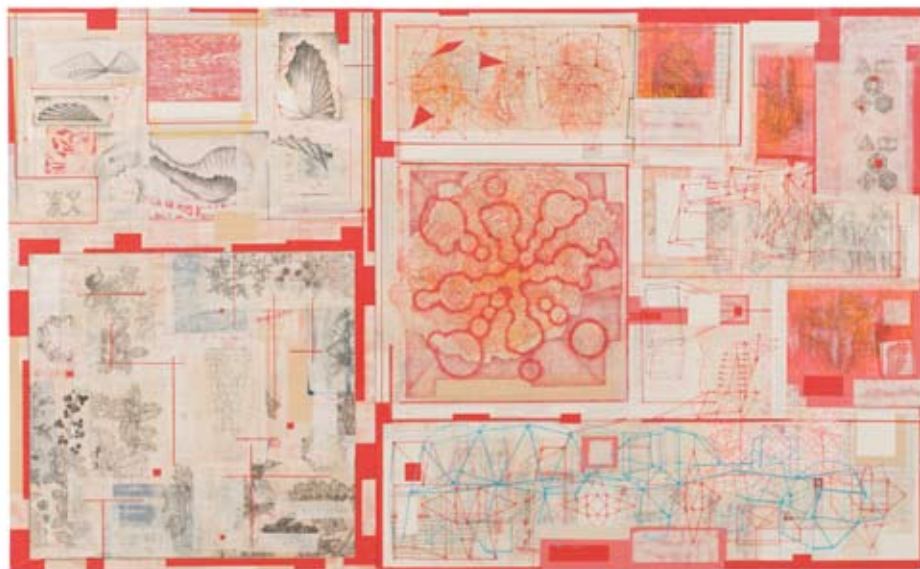
TALASNIK: I started out in Philadelphia working at the Fleischer Art Memorial, an art school administered by the Philadelphia Museum. I supervised the student gallery and organized exhibitions. Then I would work on my own art every night in my apartment, from about 8 p.m. to 2 a.m. The scale of the work was intimate—drawing—so it didn’t require a large facility. I began showing my work a little in galleries in Philadelphia. Then I moved to Japan.

YOU JUST UP AND WENT TO JAPAN?

TALASNIK: I had a chance to teach at Temple’s satellite campus in Tokyo. I left Philadelphia in 1986 and stayed until 1990. After three and a half years, though, I hit the wall in terms of being an ex-pat. So I moved to New York to do a show of my drawings, which was a big break for me. I did my show; the gallery went bankrupt right in the middle of it.

THAT WAS A HARD TIME FOR A LOT OF GALLERIES.

TALASNIK: Yes, and I had expected to come here and find a job teaching anyway. I taught part-time at Cooper Union and also commuted to Philadelphia, although it was still barely enough to cover my rent. Eventually I got a job with Parsons. They had an affiliation with a school in Japan and needed someone in New York to work as a liaison.



From top: Talasnik, *Multiple Worlds*, 2009, mixed medium on wooden panel; *Hieroglyph*, 2010, mixed medium on wooden panel.



SO THAT SOLVED YOUR FINANCIAL PROBLEMS.

TALASNIK: Not really. I continued to teach part-time, and I also began to sell my work. I would go to Europe for short periods, maybe two or three times a year, and visit museums and introduce myself to the drawing curators. My first buyers were museums. It was through them that I was introduced to private collectors.

WHY APPROACH EUROPEAN CURATORS RATHER THAN AMERICANS?

TALASNIK: I found that direct dialogue with curators as an American artist in Europe was a lot easier than with American curators. There's a certain cachet that comes with being a foreigner.

HOW DID YOU KNOW WHICH CURATORS TO CONTACT?

TALASNIK: I had jury duty around that time, and I remember taking *The Gallery Guide* and a highlighter with me. I went through every museum in the world that was listed there and tracked down whether they collected drawings and the name of the drawings curator. I had recently done a small show with a university gallery, and I sent out copies of the catalogue to 25 museums, mostly in Europe, and got back 23 responses. Within a year I visited proba-

bly 19 of those museums and eventually sold work to 12 of them—the Albertina in Vienna, the Stedelijk in Amsterdam, the British Museum in London—just by carrying drawings with me, making conversation with curators, using the fax machine, writing letters.

YOU DID THIS ENTIRELY ON YOUR OWN WITH NO GALLERY PROMOTING YOUR WORK?

TALASNIK: I had no New York gallery until I was picked up by Marlborough in 2004. I worked with a couple of private dealers, but I found that it wasn't profitable mentally just to focus on pursuing a gallery.

YOU WERE IN A GROUP SHOW AT MARLBOROUGH IN 2005 AND THEN THIS CURRENT EXHIBITION WILL BE YOUR THIRD SOLO SHOW THERE IN THE PAST FOUR YEARS. I TAKE IT THAT YOU'RE SELLING ENOUGH TO GET BY?

TALASNIK: There are ebbs and flows in the market, but for the time being I don't need to have a day job.

WHAT'S YOUR WORKDAY LIKE?

TALASNIK: It seems like I'm always working, but I'm in the studio from 8:30 to 4:30, when I go to pick up my son. He's in an after-school program that lets out at 5. He's learning Chinese.


HOW OLD IS HE?

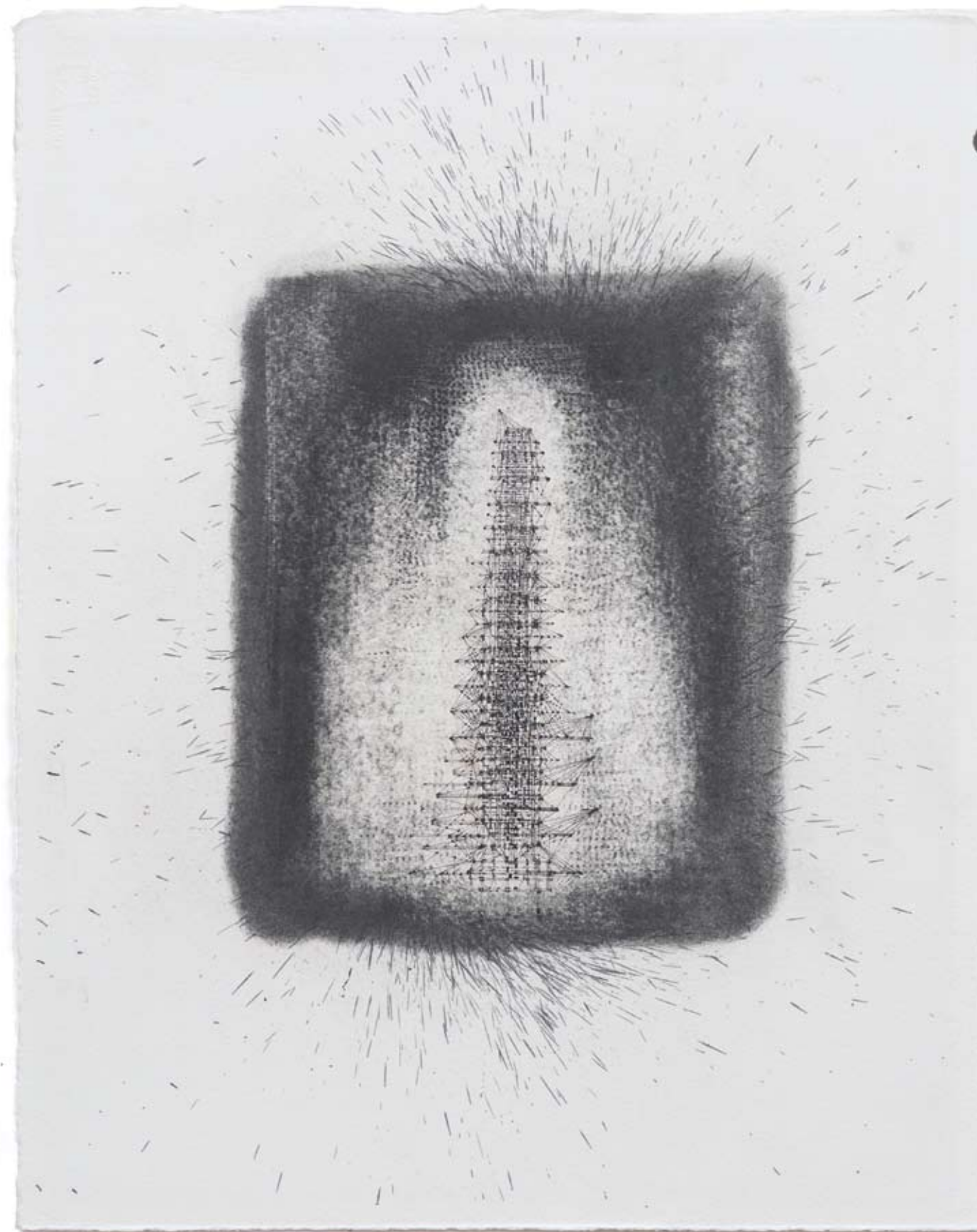
TALASNIK: Liam is 6.

DOES HE LIKE ART?

TALASNIK: He comes to the studio sometimes, and he seems interested in the fact that his father is an artist.

WOULD YOU ENCOURAGE HIM TO BECOME AN ARTIST IF HE EVER EXPRESSED A DESIRE TO DO SO?

TALASNIK: I would. I go back to my parents, who worked hard all their lives, but on some level never got to fulfill their dreams. I don't own a country house or an expensive car or a lot of other material things. Your definition of success changes over time: My definition is having the opportunity to work hard at something that I love. 



Tower, 2010, graphite on paper.

MARLBOROUGH GALLERY / D. JAMES DEE