



Parisian collective aims to put female artists on a firm financial footing

By Lily Le Brun and Margaux Derhy in collaboration with the FT community

So much for the cliché of Parisian artists surveying the city rooftops from cramped garret ateliers. When artist Margaux Derhy comes to fetch me from the courtyard of a building in the lively 10th arrondissement, we take the lift down into the network of *caves* — the cellars where occupants of the apartments above traditionally store their wine.

Despite the lack of natural light, Derhy's subterranean studio is cosy and inviting. The walls, floors and ceilings are coated entirely in undulating white plaster: it is far more reminiscent of fishermen's caves found in the cliffs near Derhy's house in Massa, Morocco — where her father is from, and where she spends the winter months — than the French capital where she was raised.

The way her working environment challenges expectations is apt. Alongside her career as an artist, Derhy, 38, is also the founder of *Le Cercle de L'Art*, an all-female collective that is rethinking the way artists navigate their careers. "I want to shatter the image of the bohemian artist, disconnected from the world and economic reality," Derhy has said of the organisation, which she began in late 2020. "I want to show that, on the contrary, artists are powerful, not only in their practice but also in their ideas and capacity to work."



Photos by Margaux Derhy for the author's article © Corbis Lumina/Getty

Artists pay a monthly subscription of around €100, gaining access to events and opportunities designed to support them in their careers, such as online forums, residencies and talks from industry professionals, art historians and — this being France — philosophers. Once a year, as part of April's Art Month, the artists offer for sale online a portfolio of around 15 works, which buyers receive upfront but only own after paying for them in 12 monthly instalments. Members of Le Cercle are encouraged to open their studios during the month, offer small perks to their collectors (brunch at their studio, for instance, or a discount on future purchases) and share how they will use the income to develop their work (such as buying new equipment or moving into a new studio space).

It's a simple idea, but its ambition is to ease complex systemic challenges that female artists commonly face, such as isolation, irregular income and lack of confidence. Over glasses of hibiscus ginger tea, Derby explains how studying for her masters in painting in London opened her eyes to ways in which artists could work together. Not only did students organise their own exhibitions, but simply "being among a group of 120 painters for two years, discussing painting, was an inspiration". Returning to Paris after graduating, she did not want to lose that sense of community. "I didn't study in France and my friends were in the UK. So that was the beginning of the idea — and then Covid happened."

The regular stipend offered by the French government to the self-employed during the initial months of lockdown was a revelation. To her and many of her peers, this relatively small measure of financial stability gave rise to an "amazing" sense of freedom. Derby therefore decided to offer 12 works for sale on her Instagram page that could be bought in monthly instalments. Everything sold within a few hours.



A few of her friends tried the tactic too, with equal success. Was Instagram not already an effective way of selling work, I wonder. "Honestly, it's not so easy for artists to sell paintings online, especially on Instagram," she replies. "You don't want to share prices online and, usually, people looking at the post are not buyers, they're simply curious. There's no impetus to buy."

Derhy decided to formalise the process, putting out an open call to other French-speaking visual artists. More than 70 per cent of the responses came from women, "prompting me to recognise a particular resonance with female artists", she says. The original "season", in 2021, attracted 20 artists. This April, 102 artists are taking part in the fourth season. Half of this season's participants were selected again from the previous year; the rest came from nearly 300 applicants. "The numbers have to remain capped in order to maintain the quality of the experience," Derby says.

New members are chosen on the strength of their work, but equally important is whether Derby — and a few of the original members who help her filter applicants — senses they will join in. "We ask: are they nice? Are they helpful? Will they want to give to the community?" It's not for everyone, she says. While she would like to expand the reach, it helps if the artists can easily get to Paris, where most of the activity takes place. It is also important that some interest in their art is already established. "It's mostly people who already know the artists that buy [during Art Month]. If the artist doesn't have any pre-existing collectors, in most cases it won't work so well — although often we are surprised." This year, the artists' ages range from 26 to 65.



Caroline Derieux at her studio in Saint-Ouen, France © Félix Fender

Caroline Derveaux, 34, a painter and mural artist, is one of those who have benefited. "Pushing the mercantile aspect of my practice was initially really uncomfortable," she says when we meet in her studio in Saint-Ouen, an up-and-coming suburb of Paris. "I am now much happier saying, "This is my art. This is how much it costs. I think it's brilliant, and I think you should be my collector," she says with a laugh.

As well as giving her confidence a boost, it has been helpful on a practical level. Mentioning a talk given to Le Cercle by an accountant, Derveaux says that when she did her MA at Chelsea College of Art and Design 10 years ago, such guidance on the more prosaic sides of living as an artist was unheard of. And recently, when she was offered a commission at the Centre Pompidou to do a large collage, a medium with which she was unfamiliar, she could ask a fellow Le Cercle artist who was experienced in working with paper, for tips. Reassured, she felt able to accept the job.



Regina Derveaux, at a talk sponsored by Le Cercle and Galerie Larock-Granoff in Paris in October 2023

Only 20 per cent of the artists involved have gallery representation, so I'm curious to know if organisations such as this could ever threaten the usual sales channels. Gabrielle Larock of Galerie Larock-Granoff, which staged an exhibition of 10 Le Cercle artists last year, says: "I'd never encountered anything like Le Cercle before. It felt fresh and positive . . . Our work as gallery owners includes thinking about the career of an artist in the long term, so I love to see artists gaining confidence and recognising their value."

Derhy simply hopes Le Cercle will enable talented women to keep making art. "I think it's really hard to be an artist today," she says. "I struggle almost every day. I just want to help artists to feel more secure, happy and not to give up."

Art Month runs to April 30, lecercle.art