BIG ART INTERVIEW

CLAIRE JULIA-HILL, DIRECTOR AND OWNER OF GALLERY LES BOIS

Finito World meets the visionary leading the way on sustainability in the art world

Finito World: You've described Gallery Les Bois as London's first sustainability-led commercial gallery. What did you feel was missing from the traditional gallery model that made this necessary?

C.J-H: What struck me, both while studying Art History at Cambridge University and later working in the commercial gallery world, was a profound disconnect between the urgency of environmental conversations happening elsewhere and their relative absence in the gallery model. In architecture, engineering, and design, people were already discussing circular systems, life cycle assessments, and net zero thinking with real seriousness. In the art world, by contrast, sustainability was often either absent or treated as peripheral.

That felt increasingly untenable. The global art market is worth over $65 billion a year, yet it remains extraordinarily resource intensive, from shipping and packaging to storage and climate control. It is an industry that speaks the language of beauty, vision, and cultural leadership, but has historically been remarkably slow to interrogate its own environmental impact.

What was missing was a model that treated sustainability not as a side note, nor as a curatorial theme alone, but as part of the gallery's underlying structure and ethics. I founded Gallery Les Bois in 2024 to address precisely that gap. I wanted to build a gallery where sustainability, conceptual rigour, and aesthetic excellence were not seen as competing priorities, but as mutually reinforcing ones. On a personal level, I also became increasingly aware of collectors requesting sustainable art and enquiring about the provenance of existing artworks.

At heart, it came from a simple conviction: if the art world has the power to shape cultural imagination, then it also has the responsibility to help shape a more responsible future.

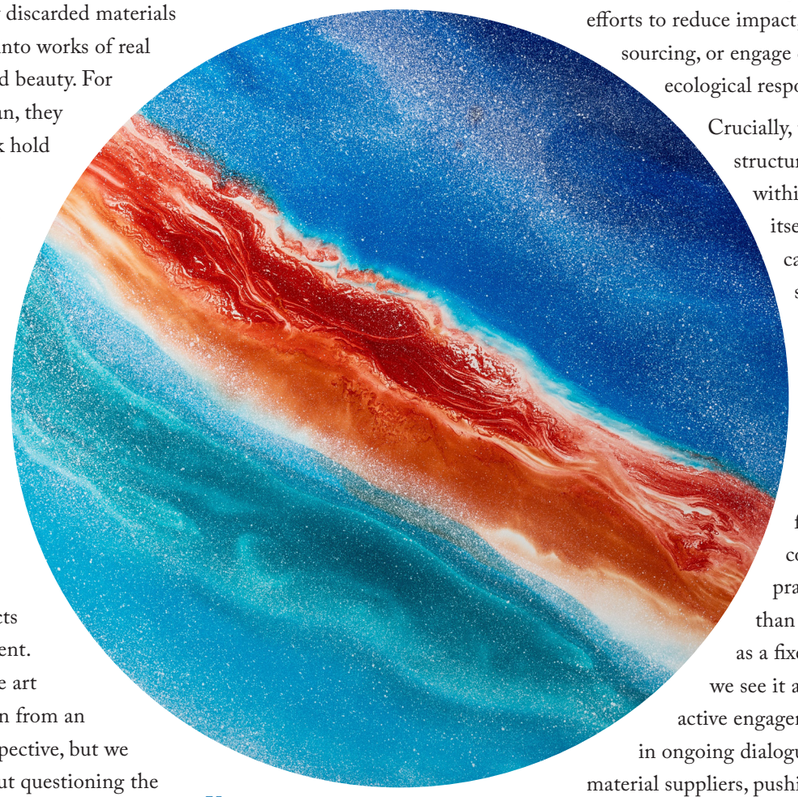
There's often a suspicion that "sustainability" in the arts can become aesthetic branding rather than structural change. How do you ensure that, at Les Bois, it is genuinely embedded rather than simply signalled?

At Gallery Les Bois, sustainability is embedded at two levels: in the artists we represent through our curatorial programme and in the way the gallery operates. On the artists' side, every artist provides a sustainability statement, and we are transparent with collectors about the nature of their practice, including whether they are fully sustainable or environmentally conscious. That distinction is important, because it allows us to maintain clarity and integrity. In the

case of artists such as John Sabraw, sustainability is inseparable from the work itself, his pigments are created from pollution extracted from acid mine drainage in Ohio, thereby transforming environmental damage into vibrant paints. With Sienna Martz, sustainability is equally embedded in her material language. She works with plant-based fibres, recycled fabrics, and second-hand textiles, refusing to use wool, leather, or animal products, and demonstrating how discarded materials can be reimagined into works of real sculptural depth and beauty. For our artist duo Volcan, they explained "our work hold history, stories, and experiences, and by reclaiming them, we challenge the traditional art making process that often overlooks the value in what is discarded. Our aim is to give these materials new life, transforming them into art that connects the past to the present. Sustainability in the art world is usually seen from an environmental perspective, but we believe it's also about questioning the systems that shape how art is made."

On the operational side, we apply the same level of rigour. We work with carbon tracked shipping, prioritise lower impact transport wherever possible, minimise waste in installation and packaging, and align ourselves with suppliers who share our environmental values. That includes working with Rokbox reusable art shipping crates, which replace the industry's reliance on single use packaging and significantly reduce waste across the lifecycle of an artwork. These decisions may appear logistical, but they are precisely where meaningful change takes place.

We do not approach sustainability as a fixed state or a badge of perfection. It is a framework for responsibility and continual improvement. Structural change is built through consistency, transparency, and the discipline to ensure that values are reflected in the day to day mechanics of the business.



You make a distinction between "fully sustainable" and "environmentally conscious" artists. How do you navigate that line without diluting the integrity of your mission?

We introduced that distinction very deliberately, because I wanted to preserve both clarity and honesty. Sustainability in artistic practice is rarely binary. It exists on a spectrum shaped by material access, medium, process, and context. To pretend otherwise would be reductive.

At the same time, if you abandon distinctions altogether, the term loses meaning. So, for us, the language matters. A fully sustainable artist is someone whose practice is fundamentally built around sustainable materials and methods. An environmentally conscious artist may still work with more traditional materials, but is actively making serious efforts to reduce impact, rethink sourcing, or engage critically with ecological responsibility.

Crucially, there are also structural limitations within the industry itself. In some cases, the sustainable equivalent of a material simply does not yet exist at the quality required for serious contemporary practice. Rather than accept that as a fixed constraint, we see it as an area for active engagement. We are in ongoing dialogue with art material suppliers, pushing for the development of alternatives that meet both environmental and aesthetic standards. A simple example would be something like a recycled plastic bottle canvas, which exists in principle, but not yet at the level of thickness, durability, and surface quality that painters require. Our aim is to help drive the creation of materials that are not only sustainable, but also desirable to work with.

I do not see this approach as diluting the mission; I see it as creating a more rigorous and workable framework. If the goal is genuine change in the art world, then we need to make space not only for those already operating at the furthest edge of sustainable practice, but also for those moving the dial in meaningful ways, and for the systems around them to evolve in parallel.

Integrity, to my mind, comes from transparency. We make those distinctions visible so that collectors can engage with them thoughtfully, and so that progress is acknowledged without collapsing important differences.

Many collectors still prioritise provenance, prestige, and return. Are you seeing a real shift in collector behaviour towards sustainability, or is the market still catching up?

There is absolutely a shift, although it is not yet universal. Provenance, prestige, and return remain deeply important, particularly at the upper end of the market, and rightly so. But increasingly, sustainability is entering the equation as an additional dimension of value rather than an external moral consideration.

What is especially striking is the mindset of younger collectors. The Art Basel & UBS Report 2024 showed that 62% of millennial collectors factor sustainability into acquisitions, while Deloitte has reported that 70% of collectors under 40 expect sustainability to reshape the market within the next decade. That indicates to me that for a rising generation of collectors, environmental responsibility is not an abstract concern. It is part of how they understand legacy, taste, and cultural relevance. I also note (Neilson) that 66 % of global consumers are willing to pay more for sustainable brands and 34 % of Boardrooms now discuss ESG at every board meeting whereas it was 15% in 2020.

I often say that collectors are no longer asking only, "Is this a good work?" They are also asking, "How was it made? What values does it embody? What does owning it say about the future I want to be associated with?" That is a very real shift.

So yes, the market is still catching up in structural terms, but collector behaviour is moving faster than many people assume. And once demand changes, the rest of the system eventually follows.

To what extent does sustainability impose limits on artistic practice, and to what extent does it open up new creative possibilities?

It does both, but I would argue that its creative possibilities are far more compelling than its limitations.

All meaningful artistic movements have emerged through some form of constraint, whether material, political, or conceptual. Sustainability introduces a new kind of constraint, one that asks not only what is made, but how and with what consequence. When approached seriously, that does not diminish artistic practice; it sharpens it.

What is particularly interesting is how this plays out at the level of material transformation. John Sabraw's practice is a powerful example. He works with scientists and environmental engineers to extract iron oxide from polluted waterways caused by acid mine drainage. The process itself is as significant as the outcome, contaminated water is neutralised, cleaned, and returned to the ecosystem, while the extracted pollutants are refined into rich, complex pigments. These pigments are then used to create paintings of remarkable luminosity and depth. The work is not simply about representing environmental issues, it is materially entangled with them. The painting becomes both a record of damage and a mechanism of repair.

Sienna Martz's work operates

differently, but with equal intentionality. Her sculptural forms are constructed entirely from plant based fibres, recycled textiles, and second handmaterials that would otherwise have been discarded. There is a quiet discipline in her practice, a refusal to rely on newly manufactured or animal derived materials which results in works that feel both intricate and deeply considered. The process is slow, tactile, and accumulative. Each piece carries the memory of its previous life, reconfigured into something that feels organic, almost ecological in its structure. It challenges ideas of permanence and value, while demonstrating that restraint can generate extraordinary visual richness.

Jasmine Pradissitto's work moves yet further, into the realm of functional material innovation. Her sculptures are created using a pioneering material that actively absorbs nitrogen dioxide from the air. These are objects that operate almost as environmental systems, responding to pollution in real time. The work collapses the distinction between sculpture and infrastructure. It raises a more radical question: can art move beyond representation and become an active participant in environmental repair?

What unites these practices is not simply that they are "sustainable," but that they expand what artistic materiality can be. Sustainability, in this sense, is not a restriction placed on the artist, it is a reorientation of attention. It forces a more conscious relationship with process, with sourcing, with impact.

Far from narrowing artistic possibility, it opens entirely new material languages and conceptual frameworks. It asks artists to consider not just the finished object, but the chain of decisions that bring it into being, and in doing so, it deepens both the meaning and the responsibility of the work.

"What struck me... was a profound disconnect between the urgency of environmental conversations happening elsewhere and their relative absence in the gallery model."

Your operational model includes carbon-tracked shipping and environmentally aligned suppliers. Has that made the business materially more complex, or has it sharpened your sense of purpose?

It has certainly made the business more complex, but it has also sharpened our sense of purpose immeasurably.

When you choose to operate in a more environmentally responsible way, you quickly realise that many of the easiest systems are also the most wasteful. Lower impact transport often requires more planning. Responsible packaging requires more thought. Supplier choices become more deliberate. There are fewer off the shelf solutions.

But that complexity has a clarifying effect. It forces you to interrogate each part of the business and ask whether it aligns with your values or simply reflects inertia. Over time, what initially feels like friction becomes a form of coherence. The operations begin to mirror the curatorial ethos of the gallery, and that alignment creates a much stronger sense of identity.

So yes, it is more demanding. But it is also far more purposeful. And I would rather build something with that depth of integrity than inherit an easier model that no longer reflects the realities of the world we are in.

You founded the gallery at 26, which is unusually young for the commercial art world. Has that helped you challenge conventions, or created additional barriers to being taken seriously?

Both, unquestionably.

Founding the gallery at 26 gave me a certain freedom, because I was not yet so deeply conditioned by the industry that I assumed its structures were fixed. That made it easier to question inherited norms and imagine a different model. Sometimes youth can be an advantage precisely because it allows you to be less deferential to convention.

At the same time, the commercial art world is still a relationship driven sector, and credibility is often measured through age, experience, and established networks. So of course, there have been moments where being younger meant having to prove seriousness more quickly and more consistently.

That said, I have found that clarity of vision cuts through a great deal. If you are deeply informed, operationally committed, and genuinely building something distinctive, people eventually respond to that. In some ways, I think founding the gallery young made the mission more urgent to me. I did not want simply to enter the art world as it was, I wanted to help shape what it could become.

"We do not approach sustainability as a fixed state or a badge of perfection. It is a framework for responsibility and continual improvement."

There's an interesting parallel between sustainability and storytelling in your work, the idea that materials carry histories. Do you see Les Bois as part of a wider cultural shift in how art relates to time and responsibility?

Very much so. I think one of the most interesting cultural shifts underway is a growing recognition that materials are never neutral. Every pigment, fibre, surface, and process carries a history of extraction, labour, geography, and consequence.

That changes how we look at art. A work is no longer understood solely as an autonomous object, but also as the visible endpoint of a series of choices. In that sense, sustainability and storytelling are deeply connected. They both ask us to think about origins, systems, and what has been hidden from view.

Gallery Les Bois is absolutely part of that wider shift. We are interested in work that carries not only aesthetic power, but also material consciousness. That does not mean every artwork must be didactic. Quite the opposite, some of the most powerful works are subtle. But they are rooted in an understanding that time, responsibility, and legacy are inseparable.

I think the art world is moving towards a broader, richer definition of value, one that includes not just what a work means symbolically, but what its making tells us about how we live now.

Art schools often practise sustainability out of necessity, through reuse, improvisation, and constraint. Do you think the commercial art world has something to learn from that ethos?

Absolutely. Art schools often foster a kind of material intelligence that the commercial art world can lose sight of. When resources are limited, artists become inventive. They learn to improvise, to reuse, to question assumptions about what is necessary. That can produce extraordinary experimentation.

There is a humility in that ethos which I think is valuable. It understands that constraint is not the enemy of ambition, and that ingenuity often emerges precisely when abundance is not taken for granted.

The commercial art world has much to learn from that mindset, especially in a moment when inherited habits around production need rethinking. Not everything needs to be maximal, disposable, or endlessly expanded. Sometimes a more considered, resource aware approach produces work of greater originality and depth.

I also think fibre art is a wonderful example of this. It resists speed. It

foregrounds process. It makes labour visible. Historically, it has often been marginalised or misread, yet today it is at the centre of some of the most urgent conversations about sustainability, ethics, and responsibility.

"Integrity, to my mind, comes from transparency. We make those distinctions visible so that collectors can engage with them thoughtfully, and so that progress is acknowledged without collapsing important differences."

How do you approach pricing in a sustainability-led gallery? Does environmental responsibility add a premium, or is part of the mission to normalise it within existing market expectations?

Part of the mission is absolutely to normalise it.

I would be wary of positioning sustainability as a kind of rarefied moral surcharge, because that risks reinforcing the idea that environmental responsibility is exceptional rather than essential. Our goal is not to create a niche category of worthy but commercially separate work. It is to demonstrate that work grounded in sustainability can stand on the international stage with the same conceptual depth, aesthetic excellence, and collectability as any other serious contemporary art.

That said, pricing always reflects multiple factors, the quality of the work, the scale of the practice, the artist's career trajectory, rarity, demand, and so on. In some cases, more responsible processes may involve additional cost or labour, but I do not think sustainability should be understood primarily through the language of premium. It should be understood through the language of value.

What we are trying to help reshape is the market's understanding of what value includes. If provenance tells one story about an object's history, then material and environmental responsibility tell another. Over time, I believe those dimensions will become increasingly inseparable.

To what extent do you see regulation, whether environmental or financial, shaping the future of the art market?

I think regulation will become increasingly important, particularly around transparency, reporting, and accountability. The art world has long operated with a degree of exceptionalism, but it is not insulated from broader economic and environmental realities forever.

We are already seeing other sectors adapt to increased scrutiny around supply chains, emissions, and responsible practice. It seems inevitable that the art market will face growing pressure, whether from environmental expectations, financial compliance, or shifting collector demands that effectively function as a form of market regulation in themselves.

That said, regulation tends to codify change rather than originate it. The more interesting question is whether the art world can evolve before it is forced to. I would much rather see the sector move through leadership, curiosity, and cultural ambition than through reluctant compliance alone.

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But one way or another, the future will require greater transparency. And I think that is healthy. If art is serious about legacy, then it must also be serious about responsibility.

There is sometimes a tension between global reach and environmental responsibility, particularly with art fairs and international collectors. How do you reconcile those competing pressures?

It is a very real tension, and I do not think there is any serious value in pretending otherwise. The art world is international by nature, and global exchange has always been part of what gives it vitality. But global reach comes with environmental consequences, especially when it relies on habitual air freight, excessive packaging, and relentless circulation.

For us, reconciliation begins with intentionality. We try to consolidate shipping, prioritise lower impact transport where possible, think carefully about what genuinely needs to travel, and make decisions that weigh cultural value against environmental cost.

I am also interested in the broader question of how the market might evolve. We already think about provenance, rarity, and condition as central to value. It is not difficult to imagine a future in which carbon tracking becomes part of that conversation too, where the environmental life of a work is seen as part of its story rather than something external to it.

Global reach still matters enormously, but I think it must increasingly become a more thoughtful and selective form of global reach. Expansion at any cost is no longer a credible model.

What role do you think galleries should play in educating collectors, not just about artists, but about the environmental implications of collecting itself?

I think galleries have a significant responsibility here. We are not merely intermediaries facilitating transactions, we are context builders. We shape how collectors understand works, artists, and, increasingly, the systems surrounding them.

That means education must go beyond the usual art historical and market framing. It should also include conversations about materials, process, transport, and the wider environmental implications of ownership and display. Not in a hectoring way, but in an intelligent and expansive one.

Collectors are often far more receptive to these conversations than people assume. Many are already asking the questions. They want to understand not only the aesthetic and conceptual dimensions of a work, but also its material life and what it stands for in a broader sense.

For me, the gallery's role is to make that conversation richer. Not to prescribe virtue, but to widen the frame through which value is understood.

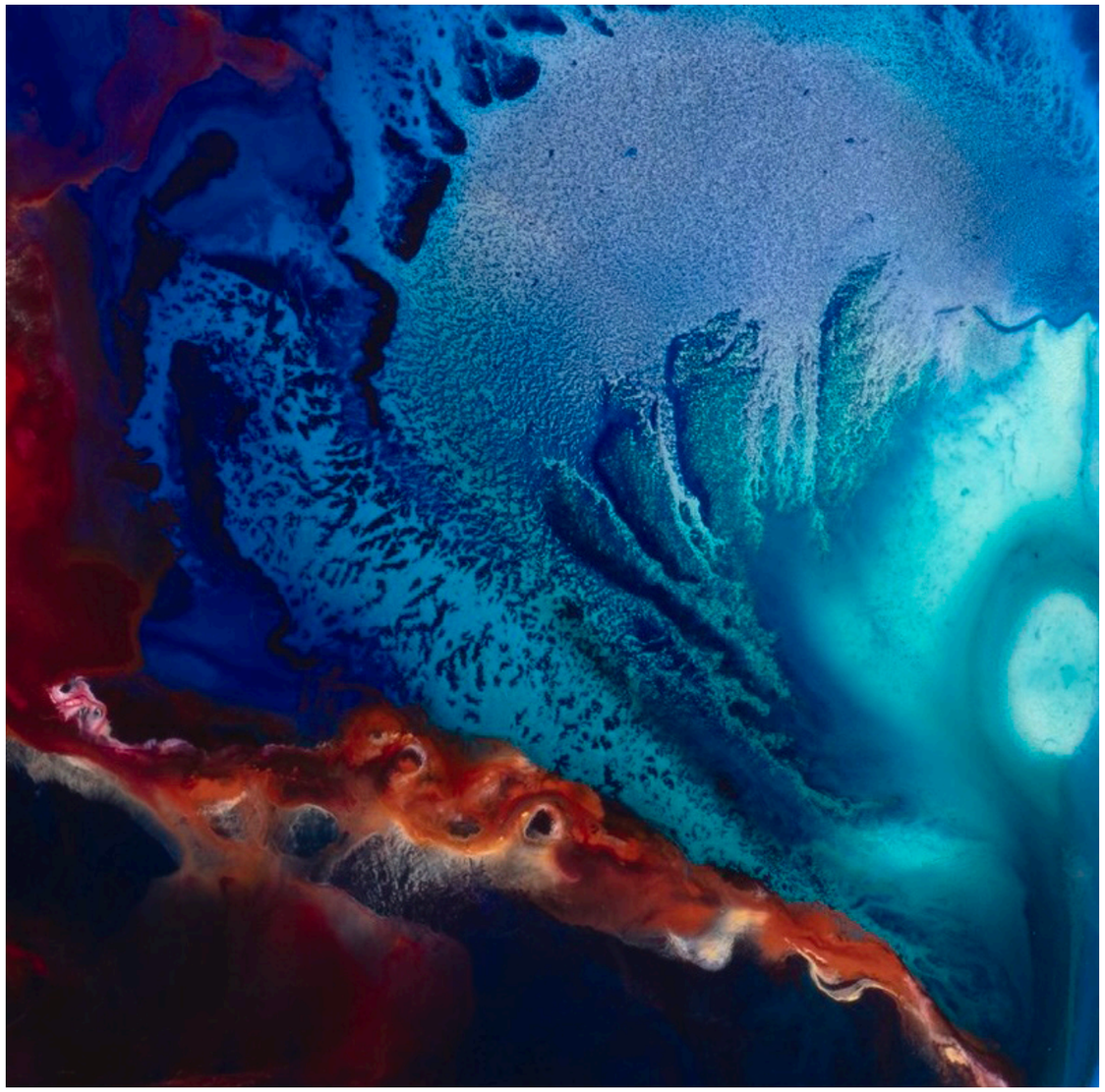
Do you think sustainability will become a baseline expectation in the art world, or will it remain a differentiating feature for certain galleries?

In the long term, I believe it will become a baseline expectation, though probably unevenly and not without resistance.

At present, sustainability still differentiates certain galleries because the sector as a whole has not yet caught up. But I do not think that will remain the case indefinitely. As collector expectations change, as regulation increases, and as environmental literacy becomes more embedded across culture, the idea that a gallery can ignore these questions altogether will become harder to sustain.

What may begin as a differentiating feature often becomes the norm. We have seen that happen in other industries, from architecture to fashion to finance. I suspect the art world will follow the same trajectory, albeit in its own slower, more idiosyncratic way.

My hope is that sustainability becomes so integral to the market that it ceases to be a novelty. At that point, the conversation will no longer be whether responsibility matters, but how thoughtfully and ambitiously it is being enacted.



If you look ten years ahead, what would success look like, not just for Gallery Les Bois, but for sustainability in the art market as a whole?

For Gallery Les Bois, success will mean proving that this model is not only ethically serious, but curatorially and commercially enduring. I would want the gallery to be known for a programme of real artistic rigour, for representing exceptional artists, and for having helped shift the terms of the conversation in a lasting way.

More broadly, success for the art market would mean sustainability no longer being treated as a niche concern or a branding exercise, but as part of how quality, relevance, and legacy are understood. It would mean a sector that has become more transparent about its operations, more materially literate, more thoughtful about transport and production, and more willing to align cultural prestige with environmental responsibility.

Ultimately, the question of success is also a question of legacy. The art market has always been concerned with what will outlive us. Ten years from now, I hope we are in a position where collectors, galleries, and institutions understand that legacy cannot be separated from the conditions we leave behind.

Art has always asked humanity a simple but enduring question- "what will you leave behind?" Today, that answer has never mattered more. f