

‘We literally put every penny into the show. It was heart stopping’



They're the visionary duo known for using creative technologies to reinvent age-old traditions. Their pioneering work is collected by everyone from the Beckhams to the V&A. Now, ROB and NICK CARTER are taking a gamble to disrupt the art market itself

Rob Carter thought it was a prank call. The person on the other end of the line was purporting to be Sir Elton John. Elton was interested, apparently, in buying some of the artworks that Rob had made with his wife, Nick. It was 2002 and Rob had also been doing some work with his friend Dom Joly, photographing promotional material for *Trigger Happy* TV. Naturally, he assumed it was the comedian. "I was going, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah,' and I thought, 'At what point am I going to interject?'" Suddenly, he realised Joly would not have known they had sent Elton a catalogue. "Oh my god," he thought. "It actually is him!"

And so began a comedy of errors. Elton made an appointment at the gallery Rob and Nick had rented in London's Cork Street, but failed to turn up. They figured »

Wedding rings: 'Spectrum Circles' (2017); (opposite page) Nick and Rob Carter at their gallery, RN At 5A

THE ART

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **Christoffer Rudquist**



OF INNOVATION

STORY BY **Charlie Burton**

» it had all been too good to be true and Rob went down the road to the pub. Suddenly, the musician arrived to buy the pieces – but neither Elton nor Nick could calculate the VAT. Someone at the gallery next door had to do the honours. Finally, Nick ran to find Rob, waving a cheque in her hand. Only later did their bank point out a slight problem: Elton had forgotten to sign it.

The whole episode was, in Nick’s words, “a car crash”. Still, a signed cheque was soon delivered – by limousine – and the sale spurred the young artists to continue their work. “Collectors should be told more often,” says Nick, “that those are life-changing moments.”

Few experience moments *quite* like that. Many emerging artists rely on an experienced gallerist to marshal them into the art world. Rob and Nick Carter (or Nicky, as she is to her friends) started out by hiring exhibition venues and dealing with buyers directly. Over the last 20 years, they have won a considerable audience. Their innovative pieces, which range in price from £1,000 to £100,000, are sought after by private collectors – Kevin Spacey, Stephen Fry, Jude Law and the Beckhams among them – as much as by institutions. The Carters’ pieces are housed at the Victoria And Albert Museum in London and the Mauritshuis and Frans Hals Museum in the Netherlands. They have had solo shows across the world, from Milan to Los Angeles, New York to Geneva. Now, they’re making the biggest play of their career.

The duo have just launched RN At 5A, a permanent viewing space in Central London that will only show their work. It is a bricks-and-mortar expression of their self-determination. Over the last ten years, artists have increasingly sought to dodge third-party gallery commissions, which can be as much as 50 per cent, by marketing themselves directly, via their own sales teams and websites. “Some of the most valuable artists have done this – Anish Kapoor is one, Damien Hirst is another,” says Ralph Taylor, senior director of the post-war and contemporary art department at Bonhams. “But this is taking it one step further. This is in effect creating a facsimile of a gallery. It looks like a gallery, it smells like a gallery, it’s got the same signage you’d expect from a gallery, yet it’s got a gallery roster of one, which is the artists themselves.”

Taylor views it as a bold response to volatile times. When the economy is uncertain and politics is in flux, the very top end of the market thrives (big names are reliable investments) and emerging artists weather the storm (they’re cheap). The middle tier – artists who are well established, who have worked with museums, who show at art fairs and achieve respectable prices – tends to suffer. In the last 18 months, many galleries dealing at that level have closed. “Rob and Nicky have said, ‘There



Family trees: ‘Bronze Oak Grove’ installation at Kensington Gardens, London, 2017

‘They will succeed or fail under their own terms. And that’s quite attractive’

are some factors that are not in our favour, so let’s seize back the initiative,” says Taylor. “It’s a fist in the air. I wonder if more people will do it.”

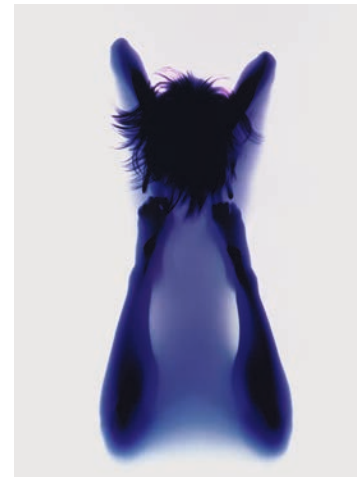
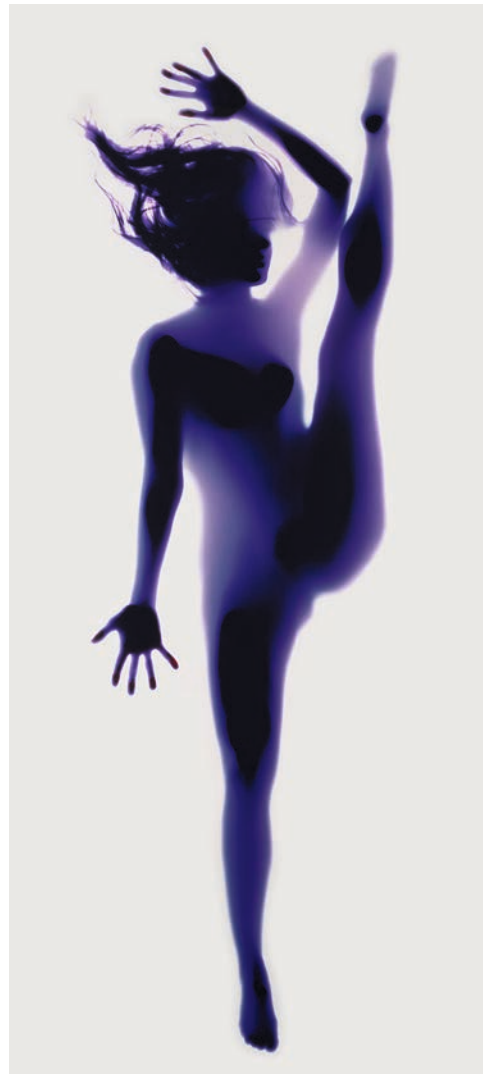
While the Carters will also retain representation with Ben Brown Fine Arts, Taylor cautions that opening RN At 5A will come with challenges. “It seems a little bit like they’re gluttons for punishment, because it’s tough when you’re managing your own reputation. But it is very interesting. It’s very unusual. Under these circumstances they will succeed or fail under their own terms. And that’s something that is quite attractive.”

One recent afternoon, the Carters gave *GQ* a tour of their studio in Acton. Step inside and you’re confronted by what looks like an enormous printer. It’s a developing machine for Cibachrome, a Sixties photographic technique that results in vivid colours that tend not to fade. It’s one of their favourite mediums; they have most recently employed it for a new series called “Yoga Photograms”. Each of the 55 images was created by directing a naked model to hold a yoga position on a sheet of photoreactive Cibachrome paper and briefly exposing it to light. After 25 minutes in the developing machine, it goes white where light has hit the paper, black where it hasn’t

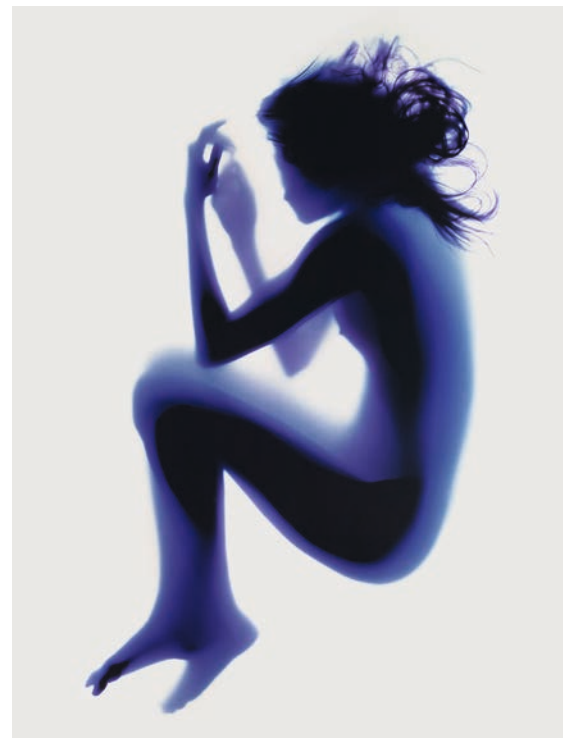
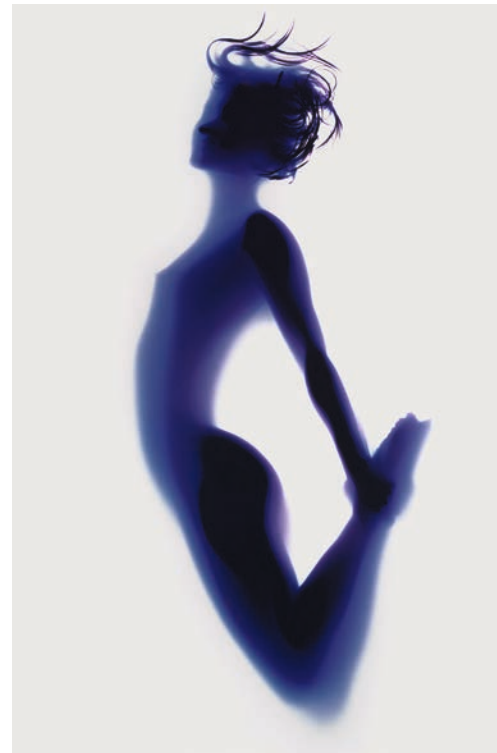
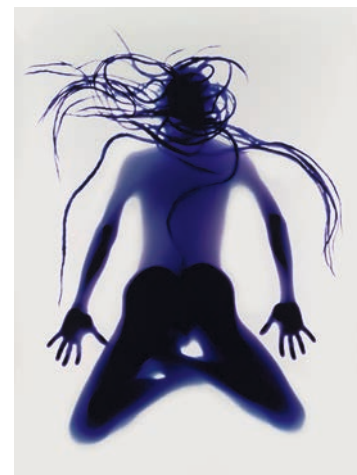
and various shades of blue where there’s shadow. The results look a little like Yves Klein body prints.

The problem was that the process was unpredictable – they discarded more than 150 prints while making the series – and Cibachrome paper is in short supply. Six years ago Ilford, its manufacturer, discontinued the product, so the pair bought a three-kilometre roll and stashed it in a freezer (low temperatures preserve the chemicals). They have been slowly working through it. “We’re down to our last 300 metres now,” says Rob, a 49-year-old with a rugby player’s build. “When that’s gone, that’s gone.” He looks towards the processing machine that they have worked with for so much of their career. “When we’ve finished, this will go on a skip.”

Upstairs is a room filled with natural light. On the walls are pieces from their acclaimed series, “Transforming”. Born out of a frustration with how little time viewers in galleries spend looking at a painting, these animated versions of old masters reward standing and watching. The most famous, perhaps, is “Transforming Still Life Painting” (2012). Framed in thick, dark wood, its computer screen “canvas” displays a replica of Ambrosius Bosschaert The Elder’s exquisite “Vase With Flowers In A Window” (1618) – but one in which every insect, petal and cloud gently moves, almost imperceptibly. The piece was created in collaboration with the visual effects studio MPC, which spent three years and thousands of man hours on the looping video. To the Carters, restraint was everything. “MPC were like, ‘Oh, we can change the signature from his signature to yours over two and a half hours,’” says Rob. “We were like, ‘No, that’s too much.’” The subtlety is entrancing. When the piece was debuted at the Maastricht Art Fair in 2012, a lady sat and watched the animation play through in its entirety – a full three hours. »



Bodies of work: A selection from Rob and Nick Carter’s ‘Yoga Photograms’ (2017), which are created using a Cibachrome developing machine





‘They have seized the initiative. It’s a fist in the air’

Sign of the times: 2011’s additions to the ‘Postcards From Las Vegas’ series include ‘Peep Show’ and ‘Frolic Room’



» Compulsive experimenters, the Carters have found a multiplicity of different approaches for breathing life into old masters. “Transforming Nude Painting” (2013), for instance, was made by inserting film of a real model into a digitised environment. “Transforming Diptych” (2013) involves live computing: it comprises two “paintings” of fruit with animated insects programmed to fly at random between the screens. “The other day it was really exciting,” says Rob. “I saw three flies just around this one apple and I shouted to Nicky as I realised that no one will probably ever see that moment again.”

More recently the couple have jettisoned computer graphics altogether. A 2016 project involved filming a live setup of a candle and a mouse, in imitation of a still life by Willem Van Aelst. “The mouse came with a mouse trainer and a vet. It was a little bit over the top,” says Nick, who is 48. They wanted one continuous 40-minute take, which the mouse didn’t necessarily understand. “At one point he went up on his hind legs and got wax on his nose, so we were told to stop filming. And then he ate some of the walnuts, so we had to stop filming again, because apparently it gives them an upset stomach. We had to put lemon juice on the nuts to make sure he wouldn’t eat any more. It was bonkers.”

These pieces have allowed them to reach unexpected audiences. “Transforming Still Life”, for instance, is the first work by a living artist ever to have been shown at New York’s Frick Collection. To Thomas Marks, editor of the art magazine *Apollo*, that accolade is especially significant. “It’s a big deal,” he says. “Their work has a way of inspiring people who might not have wanted to look at contemporary art before.”

The Carters were friends long before they were lovers. They met in 1985 at Leicestershire’s Uppingham School, where Nick’s domain was the art room and Rob’s the dark-room. “I didn’t enjoy school at all,” says Rob. “I’m really dyslexic and that wasn’t something that was discovered, so I really struggled.” Nick recalls Rob being “a very angry man” back then. Rob reflects. “Maybe less angry now I’ve got the girl.”

That didn’t happen until 1997 when, still in touch through mutual friends, Rob asked Nick on a date. “I tell everybody it took ten years and ten Sea Breezes.”

“Twelve Sea Breezes,” corrects Nick.

“She’s never been a very cheap date.”

Nick had graduated from Goldsmiths with a BA in fine art and art history and was trying to enlist other alumni such as Angus Fairhurst and Damien Hirst to contribute to the art collection of the Groucho Club, where she



Say it with flowers: Three stages showing the progression of the Carters’ digital artwork ‘Transforming Still Life Painting’ (2009-12) based on Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder’s exquisite ‘Vase With Flowers In A Window’ from 1618

worked as a manager. She enjoyed curating – today she still runs the Groucho’s art collection – but missed making pieces herself. Rob was feeling disillusioned with his work taking photographs for PR and advertising clients, so he suggested that she come over to his flat in Shepherd’s Bush and paint on some of his photos. The first attempt involved an album cover Rob had shot for the band Hang David. “But the results weren’t great,” recalls Rob. The next set used abstract images of light for the base photographs and were more successful. “The art was just lying out on the floor in the flat and a friend came in and said, ‘Oh, I love these. Can I buy them?’ They were still wet and we said, ‘OK, yeah – great!’ When he left we were like, ‘Oh my god, that’s amazing. Let’s make some more.’ That’s how it started.”

Starting out is one thing; turning it into a career is another. “We’ve taken massive financial risks,” says Nick. “At our first big show in 2000, we literally put every single penny into it – hiring the gallery, framing, catalogues, hosting. It was heart stopping.” The exhibition, at a space they had rented on London’s Cork Street, was sponsored by La Fée absinthe. “We thought, ‘This is going to be brilliant. Everyone is going to get really drunk and then buy loads of art,’” says Rob. “But actually everybody got really drunk and forgot about the exhibition completely.” Fortunately for them, over the subsequent days it sold out. “If we hadn’t sold anything,” says Rob, “we’d probably have had to sell our house.”

High-quality work is a necessary but not sufficient condition for cutting through in the contemporary art market. So why have Rob and Nick Carter succeeded where so many other artists have failed?

The pair, who married in 1998, believe that initially the Groucho Club helped give them an edge, enmeshing them in the London creative scene and introducing them to boldface names who wanted to buy their pieces. One of their first major sales, for instance, was to pop svengali Simon Fuller – the man who created the Spice Girls – after he saw one of their colourful “Spectrum Circles” on the club wall.

And then there’s their brand, which packs a punch for a paradoxical reason: it’s distinctive in its ambiguity. “They define themselves as a partnership. That has a kind of mystery to it,” says *Apollo* editor Thomas Marks. It leaves unspoken exactly who contributed what to each artwork. “And you’re not aware they’re a married couple: ‘Rob and Nick Carter’ could equally be two brothers. It’s neat that without having to create personas or create a performance around their work, they’ve created a very strong identity through their names.” »

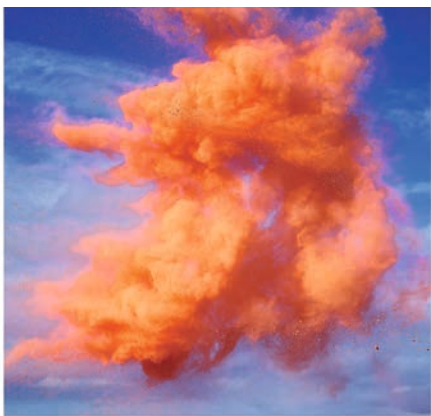
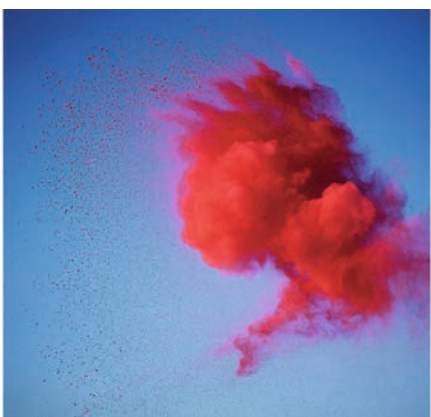
In his 1820 poem “Ode On A Grecian Urn”, John Keats closes with:
“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

The lines reflect the Romantic contention that artistic beauty was worthy of philosophical enquiry. Forty years later, it became an object of worship. The aesthetic movement placed beauty above all other artistic ideals – more important than social themes or, in fact, any theme. As Oscar Wilde puts it in *A Picture Of Dorian Gray* (1890), “Beauty is a form of genius – is higher, indeed, than genius, as it needs no explanation... It cannot be questioned.” The role of the artist, therefore? “The artist is the creator of beautiful things,” wrote Wilde. Artists soon begged to differ. Modernists such as Picasso or Matisse scorned the cult of beauty. Art had become meaningless, they said, and had to be reattached to ideas, politics and the present before it could become beautiful. For many contemporary artists, however, ugliness has become the destination in itself. The implication is that beauty is a beguiling fantasy removed from the hard realities that serious art must confront. Philosopher Roger Scruton, in his treatise *Beauty* (2009), argues that “it is not merely that artists... are in flight from beauty. There is a desire to spoil beauty, in acts of aesthetic iconoclasm.”

It’s not a charge that can be levelled at the Carters. Most of their work is unabashedly beautiful, whether it’s their neon “Postcards From Vegas” or exploding “Paint Pigment Photographs”. There has never been an aesthetic orthodoxy, of course – Scruton notes that Willem de Kooning was making his disorderly canvases around the same time as Edward Hopper was producing classic figurative paintings – but the Carters stand out for not wishing to make art that repulses. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with artwork being beautiful,” says Nick. Rob adds, “We want something that people enjoy looking at time and time again, not that’s going to be a one-hit wonder.” That has the benefit, too, of broadening its appeal to collectors. “We’ve always asked ourselves, ‘Would we hang it at home?’” he says. “That’s a good test of art.”

The question of what qualifies as “art” has taken on new contours in the digital age. If an artwork such as “Transforming Still Life” is based on a computer file – a collection of ones and zeros that can be replicated infinitely – in what sense can one own an “original”, and what’s to stop someone making an indistinguishable copy? “We encrypt it and make it quite difficult for it to be got at,” says Rob. “And the value of the work is in the certificate – it will be worth nothing without the certificate. That’s really all we can do.”

And then there are more philosophical issues.



Blue sky thinking: ‘Paint Pigment Photographs’ in ‘Nickel Titanate Yellow’, ‘Cobalt Bermuda Blue’, ‘Pyrazoquinazolone’ and ‘Benzimidazolone Orange’ all from 2012

If working with a digital technology requires co-opting experts – coders and animators, say – then to what extent are Rob and Nick’s digital pieces “by” Rob and Nick? Their defence is art historical. “Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder had a thousand artists in his studio,” says Nick, gesturing to “Transforming Still Life”. “Michelangelo wouldn’t have painted the Sistine Chapel on his own. Employing other people isn’t a sin. And each little tiny choice along the way, [we]’re making the decisions. It couldn’t be made without [us].”

Just before 6pm one evening last summer – the hottest June day in the UK for 176 years – Rob and Nick Carter arrived in London’s Kensington Gardens to open a new installation. “Bronze Oak Grove” is a circle of nine life-size bronze tree stumps based on a sketch by Jacob De Gheyn II (c1565–1629). These “real” versions were created by a combination of laser scanning, 3-D printing and centrifugal casting. It was among the first pieces of contemporary sculpture ever to have appeared in the park.

Soon the space around the stumps was bustling with guests, a sea of air kisses, champagne and cigarettes. Rob, hard to miss in his Hawaiian shirt, took people one by one to a stump for a private show-and-tell. Nick, in a pink and white floral dress, fluttered between groups, scanning for the empty-glassed. “Nicky floats along on a cloud of enthusiasm and eccentricity,” observed one of the couple’s friends. “Rob is the anchor,” noted another.

Much of the talk was about how real “Bronze Oak Grove” looks. When Rob and Nick installed it, a member of the public leaned over the fence and reprimanded them for chopping down the trees. “The gardeners are now treating them as they would normal stumps,” said Nick. “They just mow around them and then leave the grass to grow up.”

To understand the sculptures, you’ve got to go up to them and touch them to know that they’re bronze. They’re interactive. They’re surprising. They’re fun. As the sun started to set, a guest gazed at one of the stumps, now dappled by the evening shade.

“Oh,” he said, “I much prefer this to the original drawing.” **GQ**
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‘They define themselves as a partnership. That has a kind of mystery to it’

Pastoral care: ‘Transforming Landscape Painting’ moves slowly from day to night and took four years (2013–17) to animate

