

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

### Art-Shopping for Stars, So They Don't Have To



Casey Kelbaugh for The New York Times

Maria Brito, a luxury lifestyle consultant, at Paul Kasmin gallery in Chelsea. Clients, famous or not, tend to have budgets of \$25,000 to \$1 million for a project.

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Published: March 6, 2013

For Maria Brito, the Armory Show, the contemporary art fair that starts Thursday at Piers 92 and 94 on the Hudson River in Manhattan, is kind of like a Stop & Shop. Acting as purchasing proxy for clients like Sean Combs, (“His friends call him Puffy, but I call him Sean,” she said) and Gwyneth Paltrow, Ms. Brito will be looking for works by “established, midcareer and emerging artists,” she said, though her voice ticked up a notch when mentioning younger ones: “Christa Joo-Hyun D’Angelo, Andrea Mary Marshall, Caragh Thuring and Angel Otero.”

Ms. Brito, 37, is a self-described luxury lifestyle consultant. And though that term may sound more 2007 than 2013, she appears to be thriving, with a specialty of integrating art into personal spaces, which she then sometimes will decorate as well.

Certainly she hit the mass-class motherlode in Ms. Paltrow, whom she met through the fitness personality Tracy Anderson after becoming a charter member in Ms. Anderson’s

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workout studio in TriBeCa, in which Ms. Paltrow is a partner. Her work for the actress is sporadic, but recently Ms. Brito transformed Ms. Anderson's apartment in the Brentwood section of Los Angeles in 48 hours using cheerful colors and flea-market finds on what she called a "very tight" \$20,000 budget.

"It was like an extreme lifestyle makeover on speed," Ms. Anderson said on the phone. "Maria can size people up really quickly. She can find out what hopes and dreams they have."

At the three-bedroom apartment in Chelsea that she shares with her husband, Marcio Souza, 37, head of equity execution at Santander Investment Securities, and their two sons (she also works there), Ms. Brito proved glamorous and carefully groomed in a recent interview, with bouncy Sofia Vergara hair. She was wearing a denim shirt, embroidered jeans, pointy cobalt suede pumps and lots of jewelry.

"I'm not a minimalist," Ms. Brito said, her coin necklace jangling by way of punctuation.

This is clear from her own interiors. Even the room shared by Oliver, 3, and Daniel, almost 5, contains valuable art: a piece by Kenny Scharf featuring a replica of a chocolate-glazed doughnut hangs on the wall, stuffed Yayoi Kusama yellow and black pumpkins sit on the windowsill and a Smurf-blue rope and melted wax chair by Tom Price occupies a corner.

One might assume Ms. Brito understands her clients because she's in a similar tax bracket (Ms. Anderson's gym is no Lucille Roberts), but she insisted that's not the case.

She grew up in Caracas, Venezuela, the only child in a middle-class family, she said. Her parents divorced when she was 12, a rarity in the mostly Catholic country, she said. She lived with her mother, who drilled home the idea of a self-sufficient woman. "My mother told me only creative people starve," Ms. Brito said.

Though she always appreciated art, she settled on law for the security, attending Católica University in Caracas and Harvard Law School, from which she graduated in 2000. She moved through several law positions in New York before landing at Cahill Gordon & Reindel, where she specialized in leveraged buyouts. Then Daniel was born.

"I went back to work when he was 12 weeks, and I would sleep with my BlackBerry under my pillow," Ms. Brito said. "Sometimes I would barely see him for two days."

Meanwhile, her off-duty passion for collecting art was growing and she was becoming friends with some of the artists, like Mr. Scharf, whose dealer, the Paul Kasmin Gallery, will host the party for Ms. Brito's first book, "Out There: Design, Art, Travel, Shopping," in April.

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In 2009, Ms. Brito quit and started her company, Lifestyling. “I was terrified,” she said, though she added that working in law gave her “very thick skin” for the art world. She met Ms. Paltrow two years later (“She wanted something that was very difficult to find, and I got it for her”) and soon was contributing to the actress’s online newsletter, goop. Then she met Mr. Combs through another mutual friend.

“With Sean, he never bought art before,” Ms. Brito said. “The services I offer him are a lot more comprehensive. He bought a house in Miami from Tommy Mottola, and he bought it with everything inside, including the art, which had nothing to do with him.” She has been steering his growing collection, with, for example, a piece by the South African artist Brett Murray that he purchased at Art Basel Miami Beach in December.

“She’s fun to work with,” Mr. Combs said in an e-mail message, also praising her art expertise.

“I feel really good working with him because he follows my recommendations,” Ms. Brito said. “But you know working with celebrities is a whole thing. It’s great for business, but there are other complexities.”

Still, Ms. Brito said it takes some pressure off her business that her customers are less professional collectors of the sort that tend to prowl art fairs, and are more interested in actually living with their artwork.

“Very few of my clients have said they want to sell such and such artwork in five years to Sotheby’s and expect to make money off of it,” she said.

“But it does matter if the piece will retain value,” she added.

She is unapologetic about relying on eBay to meet a client’s budget, which she said generally ranges from \$25,000 to \$1 million. “It’s possible to do a one-bedroom apartment for \$25,000 including art, but that doesn’t include my fee,” she said, which tends to be between 25 and 30 percent of the project budget.

Ms. Anderson, who was touched to find her son’s photography in the Hollywood apartment’s redesign, suggested that despite the lofty luxury-lifestyle-consultant calling card, Ms. Brito respects those of humbler means.

“I almost got into a massive fight with my husband about it,” Ms. Anderson said. “He literally said, ‘Well I can clearly see you went well over budget.’”

But he later apologized, she said triumphantly. “I’ve worked with interior designers in the past, and it’s a dry experience, a lot of boards,” she said. “It never tells a story like she does.”