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Cyber galleries should click with a new generation of art collectors

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You can go to Raandesk Gallery whenever you want, and you can wear, well, whatever you want. That was especially good news for Annika Martin, who happened to be in her pajamas when she bought her first work there, an abstract painting of overlapping square shapes done in inks and food stains.

"I don't really go to galleries that often," said Martin, a 27-year-old attorney from New Canaan, Conn. "It puts you in an intimidating situation and can be a bit of a high-pressure experience. I'd rather take it at my own pace."

The gallery where Martin bought three paintings is not your trust-fund-hipster friend's typical contemporary art gallery. There is no stark, imposing, poorly marked building to find and navigate. No gallery assistant peppering you with questions like, "So what do you think of the artist's vision?" and "Are you going to buy?"

Instead, the gallery and others like it share an increasingly desirable pair of characteristics: They exist online and they're not pretentious.

That combination has helped spark interest in sites in the United States and abroad. Other online galleries that have opened their cyber-doors recently include HangArt, PicassoMio, EyeStorm and the Guild.

With their numbers growing, online galleries are starting to change the way in which contemporary art is appreciated, bought and sold. With a philosophy that emphasizes simplicity and easy accessibility, the galleries are opening doors for consumers, artists and owners alike. And they are doing it by using the Internet as an equalizing force.

"In today's market, I think you have to provide people with a sense that the gallery is there for them" by going out of your way to accommodate people, said Randy Boyes, director of the online gallery HangArt.com in San Francisco. "This generation of buyer needs something more. It can't be us versus them."

Boyes said that the majority of "them" were first-time buyers -- people who may have believed they needed to be an art expert to be a connoisseur and who lacked confidence in their own taste.

"Art should speak to you, and an online gallery gives you that opportunity," Martin said. "In the comfort of your own home, you have multiple occasions to see it."

Online galleries are attractive to first-time buyers for other reasons, too. Both Jessica Porter, owner of RaandeskGallery.com in New York City, and Boyes said their galleries offer quality, original artwork at lower prices than might be found in a bricks-and-mortar gallery: in the range of \$100 to \$10,000. Owners can afford to sell at those prices because they do not have the overhead associated with a traditional gallery space.

What's more, nearly all online galleries, PicassoMio and EyeStorm among the largest, show the work of a number of artists simultaneously and represent art in a variety of media. Many traditional galleries show the work of one or two artists at a time and for only a limited period.

Emerging artists, who represent the majority of contributors to online galleries, enjoy having their work shown with other artists and consider online galleries a great place to get exposure.