

# Inside the Gallery at Hermès



Cory Jacobs is the curator for the Gallery at Hermès, located on the top floor of the luxury retailer's Madison Avenue store in New York City. A graduate of Barnard College with a degree in art history, Jacobs began as a picture editor at Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine before moving to *Spin* and *New York*, among others. She has won numerous awards and nominations from *American Photography*, the Association of Magazine Editors, *Communication Arts* and the Society of Publication Designers, and has judged competitions for *American Photography*, *Critical Mass*, *Festival International de Mode et de Photographie à Hyères* and *PDN*. In 2009, Jacobs started working for the Fondation d'entreprise Hermès as the curator for the Gallery at Hermès and still consults on editorial, advertising and book projects.



Top: Cory Jacobs. Above: "The Tiber Muse, 2nd-1st century B.C. Graeco-Roman, Minneapolis Institute of Arts," 2008, from the exhibit "Matt Ducklo & Matthew Monteith: Mind's Eye."

**PDN:** How long has there been a gallery at Hermès?

**CORY JACOBS:** The gallery opened in 2000 and over the years has presented many wonderful shows by photographers like Bruce Davidson and William Klein. Jean-Louis Dumas, the chairman and artistic director of Hermès from 1978 to 2006, was a huge fan of photography. He was the one who decided that the top floor of the Madison Avenue retail store should be a gallery dedicated exclusively to photography. In fact, Jean-Louis Dumas made a large investment in Leica when the company was about to go bankrupt. He was known to always have his Leica with him.

It was his son, Pierre-Alexis Dumas, now the artistic director of Hermès, who decided in 2008 to formalize and consolidate their different worldwide philanthropic commitments with the creation of the foundation. I came on just after that in 2009 and the goal was to develop consistent and strong programming. The foundation oversees six galleries worldwide and also supports initiatives in the performing arts, craftsmanship, education and environmental protection.

**PDN:** Is it a commercial or private gallery?

**CJ:** It is not a commercial gallery. The job of the foundation is to support the artists in mounting a great exhibition. It is our hope that the exhibitions raise awareness about the artists and in turn, it's wonderful if they make sales from the shows. But the artists or their dealers handle sales directly.

The foundation pays for all the expenses: the production of the show (printing, mounting, framing, etc.) as well as the costs incurred for the opening. The artist also has the support of Hermès's ace New York City team: the event planning and press departments. For the foundation, this is an important part of championing the artist and the work.

**PDN:** Does the gallery have regular followers and collectors that you're in touch with?

**CJ:** Yes, I would say there are now regulars who attend the exhibitions. Over the last three and half years, I think people are starting to understand the mission and point of view of the gallery. The openings are always a great mix of artists, dealers, curators, collectors and press.

**PDN:** Is the audience for the Gallery at Hermès different from the audience of, say, a commercial gallery in Chelsea?

**CJ:** In some ways, yes. Since the gallery is on the top floor of the retail store, there are shoppers who decide to make the trip upstairs even if they are not photography buffs. And of course it's great for people who might not normally seek out the work to experience it. But since the formation of the foundation, a goal has been to attract real art lovers to the space and make it a destination. Several photographers I know who also teach photography have assigned their classes to go see the shows and I think it's safe to say they are not the usual Madison Avenue customers.



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**PDN: What is the gallery's mission? How does this relate to the goal of the Hermès store?**

**CJ:** The Gallery at Hermès exhibits contemporary photography focusing on emerging artists. I see its mission as supporting artists who are respected and have established themselves in the photographic community, but who are at a point in their careers at which they can benefit from the exposure and support of the foundation. To me, the artists share the same core values as the house of Hermès: a dedication to and love of their craft, and an innate curiosity about the world around them.

I knew very little about Hermès the brand until I sat down with them during the interview process. But I learned it's one of the last family-run companies of its kind that has been passed down from generation to generation; it's a company that truly values real craftsmanship and artistry, both in their commercial and philanthropic pursuits.

**PDN: How would you define the kind of photography you look for?**

**CJ:** This is always a hard question because there are many factors involved. The first, most simplistic answer is that I look for work I like, that resonates with me personally. After that, of course, it has to make sense for the gallery. I look for work that I feel is original; that I haven't seen elsewhere. I look for artists for whom I see a long-term potential. I look for work that is visually compelling, but has a story.

We just mounted a two-man show titled "Matt Ducklo & Matthew Monteith: Mind's Eye." Ducklo's large-format photographs depict blind people during touch tours of sculpture at major museums. Monteith's work spans a year he spent living in Rome examining people experiencing art. Both bodies of work are about the act

**Left: "Lower Broadway, 1983" by Jerry Thompson, whose work was shown in the gallery alongside photos by Walker Evans. Right: An image from "Illuminance" by Rinko Kawauchi.**

of looking and our perception of art. First off, the work is beautiful. But it also slows you down, makes you really question what it is to "see" and to experience art.

Last year, we exhibited Rinko Kawauchi's most recent body of work titled "Illuminance." Although she has almost a cult following at this point, I was surprised by how many people didn't yet know her work, principally I believe because her books were not widely available here. So we timed the show with the release of her first U.S. publication with Aperture. I had followed her work for years and was thrilled to be able to collaborate and help promote her work in the States.

**PDN: Are you solely responsible for deciding what to exhibit, or are there other people involved in the decision-making?**

**CJ:** Each year I make a detailed proposal for the foundation in Paris, which is a very small, tight-knit group with a terrific eye. Pierre-Alexis Dumas personally signs off on each show.

**PDN: How have you found the photographers you exhibited?**

**CJ:** I have found them in a variety of ways. I'd say for the most part, they are artists whose work I have been tracking for a long time. I look for new work everywhere: magazines, galleries, blogs, Rencontres d'Arles, Paris Photo, AIPAD [Photography Show], word of mouth. At AIPAD several years ago, I saw just a few pictures by a

**Right: The Gallery at Hermès, which gets natural light through the skylight. Below: An image of talc mines in Montana from the 2009 exhibition “Victoria Sambunaris: Terra Firma.”**

photographer named Jerry Thompson whose work I did not know. I tracked him down and we ended up doing a show together.

**PDN: Do you typically do exhibits on a photographer’s career, or are you looking at a single body of work?**

**CJ:** I typically look for single bodies of work, as we do not have the space to properly exhibit a photographer’s career. I also love a good two-man show.

**PDN: Your gallery is an unusual space in terms of size and shape. Does the layout present any challenges to you as a curator?**

**CJ:** The space is on the top floor of a four-story building. It is a cube, but with a few caveats: there is a circular, center staircase, a large circular skylight and some support columns. These features might be distracting, but I also see their value. The natural light is beautiful. I love that you can still stand anywhere and take in the entire show.

**PDN: Do the photographers you’ve exhibited also have gallery representation elsewhere?**

**CJ:** Some do have representation and some don’t. They might have a gallery abroad, but not in New York City. My experience with galleries has been very positive. It’s all about supporting the artists, so they see it as a



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great opportunity and simply another venue to show and sell the work.

**PDN: Would you encourage photographers to think more expansively about the kind of venues where they might exhibit their work?**

**CJ:** Certainly. Even though certain things are harder in our current economy, there are still many foundations doing great work. Then there is the ever-present pop-up gallery. And I honestly feel that getting your work picked up and “exhibited” by some of the great photography blogs out there now can have a huge impact.

**PDN: Is there anything you wish photographers understood better about how to contact—or how not to contact—a curator like you?**

**CJ:** I think most photographers are pretty up to speed with the best way to be in touch now: an e-mail with a link to images and an artist’s statement. If at that point, the work seems like a good fit, the curator will be in touch to set up a studio visit. **pdn**

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