



“
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we're ambitious and
communicative...”

THE NEW BREED

After a nomadic existence, **POPPY SEBIRE** is consolidating a space in Southwark. Is starting a new, independent gallery in a recession viable?

TEXT: **MICHAELA FREEMAN** | PORTRAIT **POPPY SEBIRE**: **MICHAEL BIRT**

HIDDEN AWAY in a narrow street in Southwark, behind a discreet door, Poppy Sebire's gallery, with its impressive high vaulted ceilings, opens up unexpectedly to visitors. All

Hallows Hall was a love at first sight for Sebire and she is very excited about being there.

Brought up in Dovedale in Derbyshire, she moved to London after studying Modern Languages at Bristol University and spending a year in Quito, Ecuador.

What followed was eight years of experience at a lot of different contemporary galleries, artists and organisations, finally running the David Risley gallery for four years.

She helped Risley build up his gallery from scratch and they got on well. He relocated his business to Denmark in 2009, a year after she left. 'I sort of outgrew it in a way. I was working so hard for him and you just think, if you're giving so much, why can't you do it for yourself...'

Her timing wasn't the best – it was September 2008, right before Lehman Brothers crashed – and despite initially finding a suitable space in Fitzrovia, Sebire decided to play it safe and not commit to permanent premises. 'If I had done that, I wouldn't be here now', she says.

But there was something else to consider – she'd already promised four artists she would represent them. 'They are all established artists who weren't going to put up with not having a gallery, so that's why I had to start doing pop-ups.'



▲ *Dark Nature* – opening exhibition at All Hallows Hall, September 2010

It was at this time she found out about an interesting legal loophole: during recession, landlords renting commercial premises on a short lease are exempt from paying business rates. Not only is this financially attractive for them, but it also keeps other tenants happy. Such was the case with one of Sebire's pop-up venues, the Piccadilly Arcade, where about 25% of the units lay empty. As she found: 'Lots of companies, like Grosvenor Estates, prefer to have people in their properties.'

In theory, a perfect opportunity for a budding gallerist, who at 30, had enough experience, but no financial backing.

But finding a suitable space was far from easy: 'I was talking to so many people. I was doing property for about three months in 2009! It was tiring. And then I met these guys, Edel Assanti, who also run the building where Jack Bell is based (see STATE issue no. 1). They said they can match galleries with empty properties, just taking a cut of any sales. I thought that was perfect, because there was no payment upfront and I had been fighting for months to find a free space.'

The only thing that ended up costing money was turning the spaces into galleries. Sebire felt she couldn't get away with showing Boo Ritson in a typically bland office space in Mayfair. With her technician Wayne, they created a pop-up gallery kit with temporary walls which could be brought in every time, re-stretched with canvas and painted over. This way they could create gallery-like rooms in any given space.

From September 2009 to April 2010, three solo shows were put up: Boo Ritson on North Audley Street in Mayfair, Danny Rolph in Piccadilly

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Arcade and Georgie Hopton in a vast space of a disused post office on King's Road in Chelsea.

'There was something nice about the pop-ups, because they all had an identity, and, as they were one-off exhibitions, they had that excitement and intrigue every time.' Nevertheless, as soon as she could see her gallery was making enough profit, Sebire started looking for a permanent location.

Whilst walking around the Goldsmiths degree show last year, she received a call from a friend about All Hallows Hall being available; saw a photograph and decided to view it straight away. Luckily, the building was owned by Southwark Cathedral who were keen for it to be used to its full potential, by an artist or a gallery. 'It was at a price that we could commit to. Before, I was looking at places in Fitzrovia that were much more expensive and had a lot less character.'

Sebire wouldn't sign the lease without first showing it to her artists and they all loved it. 'This space has perfect proportions. It lends itself so well to everything – you can black it out, you can hang an enormous painting, or show a sculpture.'

The last six months have been about 'trying to build up a profile and getting an identity'. Most shows so far have been group shows – a great way to pick up new artists, says Sebire, who's on a look out to expand her currently seven-artists-strong stable (James Aldridge, Roger Andersson, Georgie Hopton, Paul Housley, Lee Maelzer, Boo Ritson and Danny Rolph).

What is Sebire's recipe for going into gallery business today and surviving? Without any backing or help, it's important to be careful, and she has been cautious so far – not getting into debt, making a profit and growing gradually. Doing it all the second time around, after setting a gallery up for Risley, also helped, as previous mistakes can be avoided. This is true especially in the two areas she finds most sensitive for a young gallery – the issue of money and dealings with artists. Trust and mutual support is a must: 'It's just me and the artists, basically, we've built it from zero.'

Having a permanent space also makes a significant difference with regards to the gallery's commercial success. 'It's amazing how much interest it generates', says Sebire, who's seen a rise in the number of (especially) foreign

▲ **Clockwise from left:**
Boo Ritson, Librarian
Poppy Sebire under Ritson's trademark paint treatment

Paul Housley, Privilege, 2011

Georgie Hopton, Rosa Rugosa – One Up One Down, 2007

James Aldridge, Altar, 2009

collectors following her artists and who now know where to find them.

Poppy Sebire's plan is to keep plugging the gallery and constantly forging new links, not just opening the door and expecting everything to happen on its own. 'We're a young gallery and nobody knows us, but we're ambitious and communicative...'

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