

A photograph of artist Robert Nava, a man with dark, curly hair and a beard, wearing a black long-sleeved shirt and dark pants. He is standing in front of several large, abstract paintings. The paintings feature bold, expressive brushstrokes in black, white, yellow, and purple. The title 'THE BEST BAD PAINTER' is overlaid in large, white, sans-serif capital letters. The word 'THE' is at the top, followed by 'BEST' and 'BAD' in a larger font, and 'PAINTER' at the bottom right.

# THE BEST BAD PAINTER

Robert Nava is hated by art-world know-it-alls.

Why are collectors fighting for anything from his studio?

By Nate Freeman



In early January, Pace Gallery posted to its Instagram an image of a painting by Robert Nava, a 36-year-old artist from East Chicago. Pace had started representing Nava in December, and signing him was a get. Some of the wealthiest, most powerful art collectors on Earth were fighting for access to Nava's paintings. Here's a sampling of some of the comments on the Instagram post.



*Lo! Is this a joke?♡*

Insulting to Basquiat and Dubuffet.♡

**THIS IS AN EMBARRASSMENT FOR SUCH A STORIED GALLERY.♡**

*The Equivaleñt of mùMBLE Řáp.♡*

This looks like a painting my son did when he was about 5.♡

Robert Nava, *Splash Cloud* (2020)

The Nava work pictured was *Tonight Shark* (2020). In it, a crudely rendered sea carnivore emerges from choppy blue strokes of acrylic paint meant to be water. The red paint coming out of the shark's mouth evokes a cinematic amount of blood. Yellow splotches against a black background represent stars at night.

*Tonight Shark* is typical of Nava's practice. He paints sharks, but also toys, dragons, robots, angels, bats, stick figures, goblins, hybrid cat-wolves, hybrid Dracula-Jedis, and skeletons.

All of them are made as juvenile as possible—in the vein of the mainstream-shunning art brutists of the 1950s or the bad-painting bad boys of the '80s—purposefully disgorging the orthodoxy slapped into him in Yale's master of fine arts program, from which Nava graduated in 2011.

Despite the opinions shared by much of the commentariat, these paintings are starting to sell for a lot of money.

In July, Nava made his auction debut at Phillips, where *The Tunnel* (2019), a painting of a monster's blood-red eyes, was estimated to fetch \$40,000 to \$60,000. Instead, it sold for \$162,500. In the months that followed, his depiction of a transforming Power Ranger generated \$124,195. A loose rendering of an angel sold for just over \$110,000. A painting of a kid riding a giant snake brought \$100,000.

And this was before he debuted with two powerhouse galleries. In January, Nava had a sold-out show at Pace's ritzy Palm Beach space, where his works were priced from \$35,000 and \$50,000. In February, he had his first New York solo show at Vito Schnabel's new space in Chelsea.

What's more, the Mugar family, collectors with an unimpeachable star-making pedigree, began shoveling Navas into the collection, a dog whistle to fellow market players that now is the time to buy.

Over the past few months, when I told curators, dealers, and critics that I was profiling Robert Nava, many wanted to know why. In their minds, other artists, ones who did not make

Robert Nava, *Safety Angel 1* (2021); *Star Dust Angel* (2020); *Saturn Angel* (2020)





crude renditions of Power Rangers, were far more worthy of attention. One advisor said they would never sell that “trash” to their clients. Another said unprintable things about the people who were buying Nava’s paintings.

But even if they couldn’t see the appeal of Nava themselves, they wanted me to answer a question: How does someone on a journey to the end of taste become the most sought-after young artist on the market?

I started asking around. Marc Glimcher, Pace’s president, is a biased observer, as he’s Nava’s dealer. But he loves the work in a genuine, almost giddy way. Glimcher said he grew up with Dungeons & Dragons, and when he saw Nava’s lovingly raw depictions of the game’s mythological creatures, he had a gut reaction. Glimcher’s wife, Fairfax Dorn, gave him a small Nava for his birthday, and he was elated.

And yet Glimcher acknowledged that the brash artist’s approach has polarized the market.

“People are furious, just furious,” he said.

“People are saying, ‘How dare someone make such a simplistic, childish thing?’ There are people who are like, ‘Oh, this is some Yale kid who has come up with this gimmick.’ And nowadays, people are terrified they’re being sucked into a gimmick.”

On a decently warm day in December, I walked up to a building in a still-industrial segment of Bushwick. On the door were fliers for short-term studio spaces and cheap couches for sale. Surgical mask affixed, I smashed the right buzzer with the back of my wrist and climbed the stairs to Nava’s studio a few stories up.

He greeted me at the door in a full-on gas mask. His cat, Jumanji, darted from one end of the studio to the door.

“I hope you like cats—I should have given you a heads-up. Sorry dude,” a muffled Nava said.

Even with the gigantic apparatus hiding most of his face, the creases by Nava’s eyes



Nava with his cat, Jumanji,  
in February 2021



Robert Nava's solo show at Pace Gallery in Palm Beach in January 2021

indicated a smile. He seemed happy to have a visitor. He had not had many recently.

Nava offered bottled water, which I declined, as I was trying to pet a very mobile Jumanji, who darted up an elaborate jungle gym in the studio. Beyond the cat, I saw the paintings.

There was an angel, small and scowling, set against a marigold background. And a knight mounted on a bunny-slash-horse. Sketch-filled notebooks were strewn on small tables spine-down, perhaps left for a reporter to see, or left as they always are.

Though Nava's output isn't prodigious, his process can alchemize quickly. After hours or even days of sketching out an idea for a painting, he puts on gigantic noise-canceling headphones, blasts techno, and makes art.

"I can catch what the zone is, in a good painting session, and just paint," he said, walking up to a canvas and gesturing at the strokes.

He was talking about what's become a Robert Nava mythos: the speed at which he works. His record, he said, is one painting in 27 seconds. The figure emerges in a single swift moment—a one-hit composition.

That's another thing that makes people doubt the value of his creations. How can you spend the cost of your daughter's Ivy League education on something that's made in the time it takes to watch an ad before a YouTube clip? Nava contends his slapdash process builds on an obsessive amount of internalizing, agonizing, looking out the window, and looking into past obsessions and the way they resurface.

Plus, he's working on taking more time. "Sometimes you need to go slow in the face of speed to make it look like speed," he said.

Glimcher and others insist that Robert Nava's paintings have to be seen in person and don't translate well to reproductions on a phone or computer. That's not an ideal quality for artworks in the middle of a pandemic, when critics and collectors are forced to evaluate and purchase work based on what they see on a screen.

I had a similar experience with Nava. As New York started to open up last fall, galleries began to offer appointment-only visits. The inaugural show at the gallery directly across the street from my apartment, Bill Brady's ATM, had two small Nava drawings, including one of a hungry wolf looking for prey.



In an email announcing the show, the works on paper appeared even more unruly than Nava's paintings—a punk band's demos screechier than the blitzing studio versions. But in the flesh, the lines had a powerful kinetic energy, with fast vrooms of stroke making the crayon predator look like he was actually chomping.

They were priced at \$3,500 each, 10 times more than his drawings had cost a year earlier, and sold before the show opened. A source at the gallery recounted swatting away daily inquiries from fans ranging from a Lebanese megacollector to skate kids who rolled up to the front door.

A few weeks after the show opened, a similar crayon drawing sold at auction for \$16,250.

**Nava grew up in East Chicago. His father was a crane man for the Inland Steel Company, and his mother was a receptionist at Prudential Life Insurance. Sometimes she would bring home looseleaf printer paper from work for Nava to draw on. When the kids in high school talked about who could actually draw from life, they talked about Nava.**

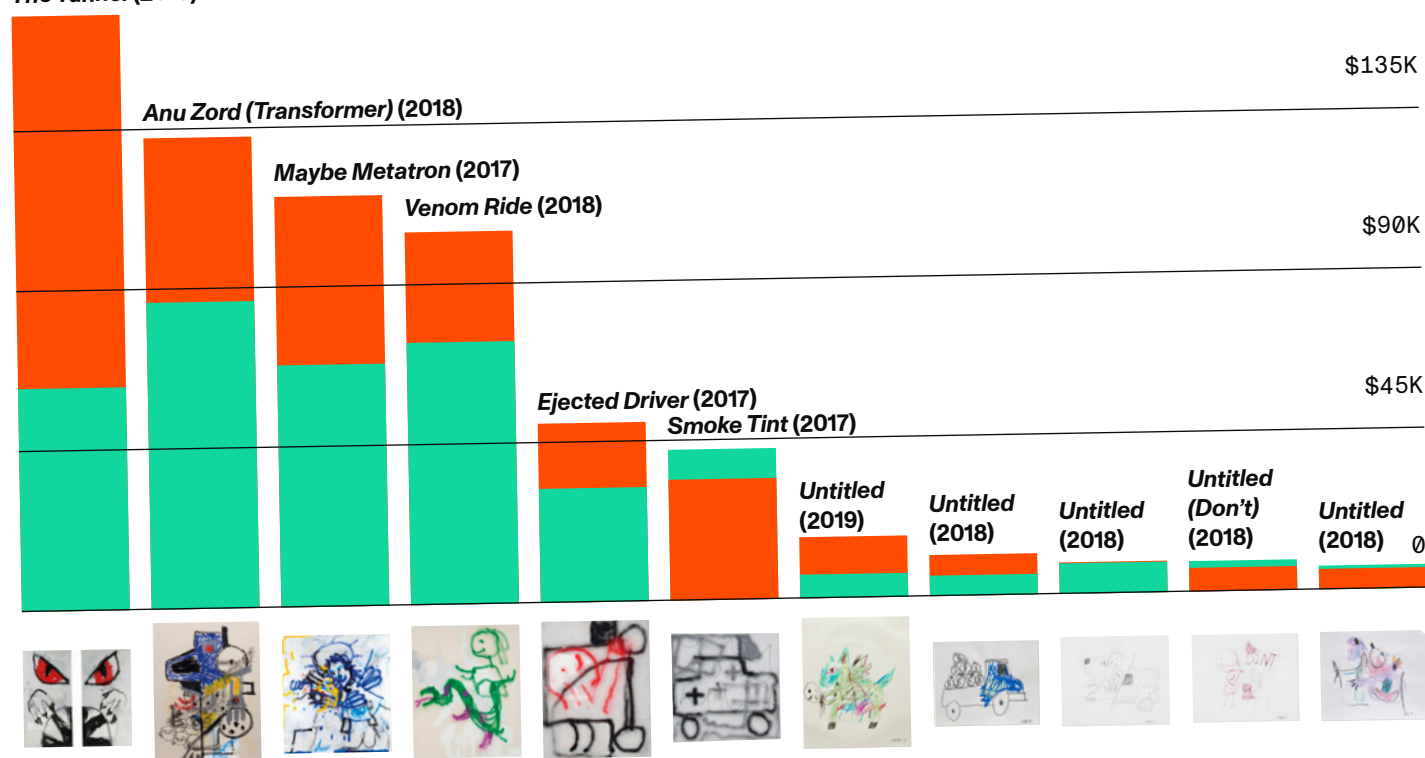
After attending nearby Indiana University Northwest, he split time between the studio and a number of odd jobs: as a bouncer at a club, as an office equipment mover. Eventually, he pulled together a portfolio and applied to art school. Then came the rejections: UCLA, CalArts, Cranbrook, the Art Institute of Chicago. But one letter came back thicker. He'd been accepted to the Yale University School of Art, an institution that's as über-establishment as any art-star-making degree machine on the planet.

During Robert Storr's storied decade at the helm of the school, Nava experienced its infamous "Pit Crit" sessions, in which painting students stand alongside their work in a subterranean gladiatorial round as professors and peers rip into them. (In an email, Storr said, "I am afraid that I have no memory of Robert Nava from his time at Yale.")

Robert Nava, *Saturn Angel* (2020); *Cloud Rider Angel* (2020); *Night Storm Angel* (2020)



The Tunnel (2019)



After being pushed to unlearn what he thought he knew, the young artist came out the other side with a renewed commitment to the dragon drawings of his youth. He moved to New York, but his career was slow to take off. He made 10-hour truck-driving runs to pay rent. The trucks began to show up in his art—some with headlights as eyes, grates agape like giant mouths. “They became the masks or the faces of gods,” Nava said.

By 2016, he was showing the truck paintings at artist-run spaces in Bushwick and working out of a small studio with no heat and one window broken. Around that time, he was scouted by Francisco Rovira Rullán, a dealer and curator based in San Juan, who showed some of Nava’s work at Expo Chicago. Images of the pieces started to circulate on social media, mostly because they stood out from everything else at the fair.

One of the people who saw them on Instagram was Sébastien Janssen, the proprietor of the Brussels gallery Sorry We’re Closed. “I saw two works, and they were so special, so weird, I was completely attracted to these

paintings, so I started following Robert,” Janssen said.

They arranged a studio visit for the next time the dealer was in New York. In person, Janssen said, “the paintings were just as good—better.”

He gave Nava his first proper solo show in Brussels, asking \$12,000 each for large paintings. Janssen’s clients needed a bit of convincing.

“A lot of people say, ‘What’s this shit, what’s this children painting, it’s not relevant,’” Janssen said. “I didn’t sell anything at the beginning of the show, but I sold everything at the end. Because when people start to look at the works, they become the paintings they want to see. He’s a virtuoso in a way.”

Los Angeles’s tastemaking Night Gallery and Sorry We’re Closed both brought paintings by Nava to NADA’s Miami fair in 2018. (At that point, a large painting had inched up to \$15,000.) There, they caught the attention of Ballroom Marfa founder Fairfax Dorn, who later gushed about them to her husband, Marc Glimcher.

He needed some convincing, too.

“Fairfax comes back from the NADA art fair, she pulls out her phone and says, ‘This is it, this



is the new guy,'” Glimcher said. “I looked at her phone and said, ‘Honey, you’ve *lost it*.’”

Like many others, Glimcher was unmoved by the images on the phone, but he was intrigued enough to do a studio visit after viewing them on the computer.

Around the same time, the dealer Vito Schnabel came across Nava’s work on the feed of well-connected art publicist Andrea Schwan. Since his early teens, Schnabel had been putting on shows of work by artists, including his father, Julian Schnabel. But Vito was looking to start representing talents of his own generation, and he found himself drawn to Nava’s neon-lit cave paintings of cultural fixations.

“There’s something very relatable, from the Transformers to the Power Rangers, and then they transcend that,” Schnabel said. “There’s something nostalgic about it for me—it brought me back to a place.”

The desire to revisit the past is at the heart of Nava’s appeal to (often white, usually male) collectors. The work transports them to a time when the biggest thing they had to worry about was a monster under the bed.

Nava is not the first institution-branded artist to paint punch lines for the my-kid-could-do-that crowd. But he might be the first to do so with only a hint of irony. Sure, there’s humor here, but it’s not a coincidence that Marc Glimcher both earnestly likes *Dungeons & Dragons* and earnestly likes Robert Nava paintings.

Glimcher—as well as, I’m told, his father, Pace founder Arne Glimcher—sees Nava as part of the long line of artists Pace has supported whose work plays with the high-low dynamic, most notably Jean Dubuffet, the founder of the art brut movement.

“Obviously, there is a tradition in the second half of the 20th century of pushing against your training,” said Glimcher, who first visited Dubuffet’s studio when he was nine years old. He also compared Nava to an artist whose insider-outsider status confounded people not just during his lifetime but for decades after: Jean-Michel Basquiat.

“Jean-Michel used to come over to the gallery to see the Dubuffet paintings,” Glimcher said. “And the same response was leveled at Basquiat—people saying, ‘What a gimmick this is.’ There were tons of people saying that.”



*Night Storm Angel* (2020); *Asteroid Maker Angel* (2020); *Volcanic Angel* (2020)



“That person sold that?  
For *that*?” He paused and turned back toward me, the  
gigantic gas mask still affixed to his head.



Untitled (2020)



*The Tunnel* (2019)

**In early spring 2020, Nava's career was accumulating momentum. Then the world shut down. As auction houses retooled their May evening sales as midsummer online bonanzas, they looked to fresh contemporary art to create buzz in the absence of boozy dinners and cocktail parties.**

For Phillips, one particular Nava, *The Tunnel*, fit the bill. "I found it arresting," said Rebekah Bowling, a senior specialist at Phillips. "It's that raw energetic nature of it that feels very genuine."

When asked if her colleagues shared her convictions, she circled around the question. "I talked to a lot of people after the show at Night Gallery, and half the people were like, 'He's the next Basquiat,' and then half the people were like, 'I hate this thing.'"

Around this time, Janssen estimated, the waiting list for a work by Nava was several hundred people long. If you weren't buying at auction, it could take years to get to the front of the line.

This pent-up demand likely pushed one early Nava collector (er, flipper—they had only owned the painting for a few months, sources said) to consign *The Tunnel* to Phillips. In a highly unusual move for an auction debut, the house slotted it into its evening sale.

*The Tunnel* came on the block with an estimate of \$40,000 to \$60,000 and sold for \$162,500. Immediately, other Nava collectors started calling around asking for appraisals on works—sharks, dragons, Transformers—that they had bought not even two years earlier for \$25,000.

In the months that followed, 11 more Navas hit the block. Nine handily exceeded their estimates; two sold within expectations.

On the primary market, Nava's show with Vito Schnabel sold out before it even opened. One advisor told me that these freshly placed paintings, priced at \$60,000 a pop, already had deep interest on the secondary market, with collectors offering as much as \$250,000 to skip what's looking like a never-ending wait list.



## Toward the end of our studio visit, I asked Nava how he felt watching that first Phillips sale.

“That auction, when it was first happening, I went to all the worst places I mentally could,” he said. “And then I was like, Oh, shit, I hope it doesn’t even, like, sell—” Nava walked toward a cool drawing of a feral wolf.

“It’s going to keep happening, the auctions,” he said. “At this point, I’ve had the nightmares. These people, they’re sharks. If people are manipulating it, I can’t do anything.”

He leaned closer to the wolf drawing.

“But it’s crazy, man,” he said. “That person sold that? For *that*?”

He paused and turned back toward me, the gigantic gas mask still affixed to his head.

“And then you keep on making the paintings.”

I wondered aloud if he wanted to have museum shows in the future. The primary metric of whether an artist can survive a vogue of popular opinion or a swoon in the markets is the acceptance of institutions. And Nava’s curatorial attention has lagged considerably behind his market success.

He’s had minimal traction so far: John Marquez, husband-and-wife Rob Westerholm and Monica Wesley, and the Simkins family gave several works to the Art Institute of Chicago, while the collector Andy Song donated one to the ICA Miami last year. (The institute’s chief curator, Alex Gartenfeld, described Nava’s work as “keenly aware of the foundational influence of self-taught artists on art history, and the profound impact of figures who disrupt dominant art-historical languages.”)

As Jumanji crawled off the cat jungle gym, I asked Nava if he cared that some people hated his work.

“People make fun of me, I’ve heard it all,” he said. “People that love it, love the work, and people that hate it, they absolutely hate it.”

Jumanji scampered into Nava’s sleeping alcove. Hanging above the bed was a gigantic pietà of an exploding neon angel. It was a one-hit—instant alchemy turning gods into art. Nava never plans to sell it.

“She has to be able to cut the head off of all the other things that I make,” Nava said. “And I think she can.”



Robert Nava's solo show at Pace Gallery in Palm Beach in January 2021