THE FEATURE STORY

Hudson is a discerning if unconventional dealer whose Lower East Side gallery inspires a loyal following.

BY STEEL STILLMAN

View of the event "Power to the People," May 1, 2010. Photo Avi Adler.

ON A WARM SATURDAY afternoon last spring, nearly 400 people lined up outside the contemporary art gallery Feature Inc. on New York's Lower East Side for an event that promised "free art: one piece per person please." Billed as "Power to the People," the event was a "benefit" at which works donated by 263 artists—a number of them well-known, with lengthy résumés and pieces selling for tens of thousands of dollars—were given away to the public in a spirit of love and sharing. No money changed hands.

Feature is sometimes mistaken for a nonprofit artist's space because of its grassroots attitude. In fact, it is a for-profit enterprise that has, over the last 26 years, helped launch the careers of Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami, Richard Prince and Lily van der Stokker, among others, while continuing to pursue an adventurous program. "Power to the People" was scheduled for May Day, in many countries the occasion for celebrating the aspirations of workers—or in art-world terms, artists. Like the now-defunct gallery American Fine Arts, Feature has had a reputation for valuing art and artists above success and power, which begins to explain why so many artists would donate their work to the event.

Feature is presided over by its founder, Hudson (he goes by one name), a vibrant, exacting 60-year-old with a buzzed head and a dancer's body. The gallery has regularly employed additional staff, but Hudson's uncompromising art-centric sensibility permeates the entire operation. "Power to the People" was no exception: the benefit was an act of resistance to those aspects of the art world that, to many, have little to do with art. By chance, those aspects were strikingly apparent four days after the event, when a single painting, Picasso's 1932 *Nu au Plateau*

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de Sculpteur, sold for $106.5 million at Christie's New York, the highest price ever paid for a work of art at auction. To many observers this transaction signaled that the upper-class marriage of art and money, a little wobbly just the year before at the start of the recession, was back on track; but to the artist community revolving around Feature it provided fresh proof that esthetics and the increasingly inflated art market remained emphatically dissociated.

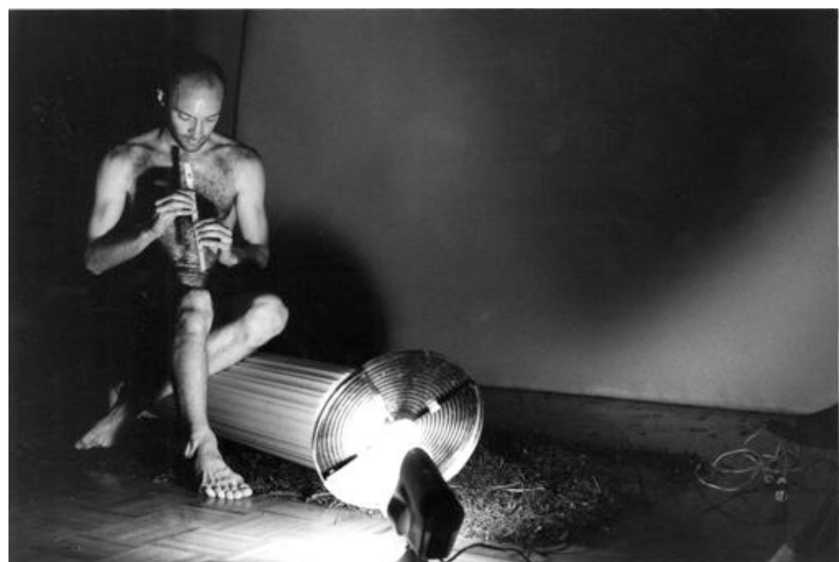
The problems that gave rise to "Power to the People" began to develop in September 2008, soon after Feature moved into a large, renovated storefront on the Bowery. The lease on the Chelsea space the gallery had occupied since 1999 was up, and vanguard dealers were heading farther downtown to get away from the congestion and rising rents in that neighborhood. In 2007, the New Museum had inaugurated its new building, also on the Bowery, and the Lower East Side was teeming with art activity. Feature, it seemed, would be in the thick of it. But then the stock market collapsed and the global economy began its downward spiral. Saddled with renovation bills and a dearth of clients, the gallery struggled. In the summer of 2009 it closed its doors.

That fall, a number of artists and friends proposed holding a benefit to help the gallery get back on its feet, figuring that many of the big-name artists who had shown there over the years would be willing to donate work. Hudson resisted the idea—benefits were for nonprofits—and wavered. In December 2009, operating on a shoestring, Feature reemerged in a significantly cheaper and somewhat smaller space on Allen Street, a few blocks from the Bowery location. A benefit had not proved necessary. Yet word of its possibility had precipitated an enormous outpouring of interest and good will. In response, Hudson suggested to would-be contributors that they redirect their generosity by offering their art for nothing to the public at large. "Power to the People" was born.

FORMERLY A PERFORMANCE ARTIST, IN 1981 HUDSON PREMIERED *THE GREEK AND FRENCH ARTS*, DESCRIBED IN THE SUBTITLE AS "AN ART HISTORY PORNO COOKING LESSON."

WHEN FEATURE first opened on West Huron Street in Chicago on April Fools' Day, 1984, the East Village art scene was taking off in New York, and Hudson was inspired by what he saw there. "Artists, especially younger artists, were fed up with the commercial galleries' lack of attention to their work, and a new, DIY breed of galleries was opening up," he told me. "I liked the idea of a generic room with things in it, and wanted to create an unpretentious environment where art-makers and viewers could feel at ease without the encumbrances of architecture or class."

Hudson and I spoke several times last summer, over tea in the gallery's new office, sitting on a pair of Roy McMakin rocking chairs. (Feature showed McMakin's hybrid furniture-sculpture from 1999 to 2004.) I was surprised that he had agreed to talk to me. I've known him since the late '80s (and I contributed a photograph to "Power to the People"), but I've sometimes found him unapproachable. In all the gallery's locations—first in Chicago, then in various sites in New York after its move there in 1988—Hudson's desk has been visible to visitors, yet his austere demeanor and intense focus discourage interruption.



Hudson performing *The Greek & French Arts, an art history porno cooking lesson in the style of romance and idealism*, 1981. Photo Thom Middlebrook.

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Hudson grew up in West Haven, Conn., and graduated from Southern Connecticut State College, where he majored in art education, with a minor in fine arts. In the early ’70s, he moved to Cincinnati to study sculpture and figure modeling with Michael Skop, whose own teacher had been a pupil of Rodin. Hudson had already begun studying contemporary dance and continued to do so at the University of Cincinnati while working on an MFA in painting, which he received in 1977. While still in school, he performed with Contemporary Dance Theater, a repertory company, and the short-lived Judy Gregg Dance Company, both of which were based in Cincinnati. Several New York dance troupes that visited Cincinnati to work with CDT invited him to join their organizations but he declined; he’d become more interested in the multidisciplinary nature of performance art. A ruptured disc sealed the matter, and, unable to continue dancing professionally, he began to create a series of solo performance-art pieces for himself. By 1978 he was appearing at venues across the Midwest, including the Allen Art Museum at Oberlin College in Ohio, where, as part of the 1981 “Young Americans” exhibition, he premiered his piece *The Greek and French Arts*, *an art history porno cooking lesson in the style of romance and idealism*.

Hudson began learning the business side of the art world in Cincinnati. He managed a dance company, and was a member and later served on the board of the artist organization C.A.G.E. (Cincinnati Artists Group Effort), which hosted and curated exhibitions, performance art and new music, and issued publications. Then, in 1981, his involvement with the National Association of Artist Organizations led to a position at Chicago’s Randolph Street Gallery, a nonprofit artist-run space, where he worked at developing a multifaceted program. Hudson recalled, “I was aware of a wide range of artists who were pushing ideas and expectations, and it was a pleasure to introduce audiences to the work of people like Jack Smith, Karen Finley and Alex Grey. I also had the opportunity to foster what was developing in Chicago, and amazing things came out of the woodwork.” Once, though, in 1982, he was reprimanded for programming a piece by Gregory Green (an artist who later made sculptures that were almost-complete homemade bombs) and Rob Fronk, in which the two performers dueled with chainsaws. “It was completely threatening and real,” he said, “and within minutes the audience bolted.”

After three years, the limitations of an artist-run organization began to annoy him—especially peer panel reviews and what he saw as the policing of content. In late 1983, he scraped together the money to open an art gallery. He continued to perform, though with decreasing regularity, until 1992. “I didn’t have much more that I wanted to say or share with the public—and I’m not a fan of repetition,” he observed. “While it felt weird to no longer identify with what I thought I had been since I was about 10, it was also deeply freeing.”

From the beginning, Feature presented a wide range of artists and styles. “Nearly 10 years of working in the plurality consciousness of artist-run spaces had established my interest in diversity,” he explained. “All around the country—all over the world—there were pockets of interesting things that I wanted people to enjoy, or at least be aware of. It seemed more important to stay open to the breadth of contemporary art than to settle on the obvious.” The inaugural exhibition in Chicago in 1984 featured Richard Prince’s appropriated fashion photographs, alongside a group show that included Sarah Charlesworth, Sherrie Levine, Rene Santos and others. Hudson had been introduced to these New York artists by William Olander (1950-1989), who, as a curator at the Allen Art Museum, had organized several prescient “Young Americans” biennials in the ’80s. “In the fall of 1983 I went to Richard Prince’s apartment in the East Village, where black plastic sheeting hung half-protecting, half-hiding floor-to-ceiling bookcases, meticulously filled with thematic arrangements of paperback pulp novels, some spine outward, some face outward,” Hudson recalled. “It made sense that he was collecting pulp fiction, and that display was part of the process—it all seemed to parallel the casual feel and formal rigor of his photographs.”

Many of the artists who showed at Feature during its Chicago years remain at the forefront of contemporary art. Among them are Levine,

Left, Jim Shaw: *Hudson Bubble Gum*, 1993, bubble gum, 17 by 14 inches.

Below, view of Jeff Koons’s exhibition, showing the “Equilibrium” series, at Feature’s Chicago gallery, 1985.

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Troy Brauntuch, Jim Isermann, Larry Johnson, Mike Kelley, Louise Lawler, Hirsch Pearlman, Raymond Pettibon, Kay Rosen, Jim Shaw, Haim Steinbach, Tony Tassett and James Welling—none of whom are represented by Feature today. Undoubtedly the best known is Jeff Koons, whose "Equilibrium" series was exhibited at Feature in the fall of 1985. It was the second solo show of Koons's career—the first, with the same body of work, had occurred just months earlier at International With Monument, in New York's East Village. The "Equilibrium" series includes Koons's now-famous sculptures with basketballs suspended in tanks of distilled water; at Feature those works were priced at $3,500, and none sold. Two months later, when the prices for these pieces had rocketed to $70,000, Koons had already moved on. Charles Ray also benefited from early exposure at Feature; he had his first solo show there in 1987 and was represented by the gallery until 1993. "I'd seen Charlie's work when I was on an NEA panel, reviewing grant applications," Hudson said. "He was making reductive forms in metal—boxes, containers and shelves—that he activated with his own body, leaving parts of his body showing or sticking out."

Feature also exhibited several outstanding Chicago artists. Among them were Jeanne Dunning, who was making subtle, uncanny photographs of the human body, and Darinka Novitovic, who later moved to New York, where she still lives and works. "Darinka made black-light paintings—abstractions with occasional figurative elements—that were abrasive yet romantic, and captured the no-nonsense femininity of that time," Hudson told me.

Above, Tom Friedman: Untitled, 2000, construction paper, 12 by 114 by 120 inches. Photo Oren Slor.

Left, view of Charles Ray's *Bench*, 1974, wood, 11½ by 120 by 1½ inches, with Hudson and the artist.

BY AUGUST 1988, when Feature relocated to Broome Street in SoHo, its core values were firmly established. "I don't have an agenda, but I often say that the gallery's M.O. is to show work that addresses the issues and trends of the day from a more personal or intimate point of view," Hudson said. The gallery's possibilities had seemed limited in Chicago, and, in one sense, the timing of its move was serendipitous: that fall, Feature's former Chicago home, an early Louis Sullivan building on West Huron containing a dozen or more galleries, burned to the ground.

But other hazards loomed: a recession, brought on by the 1987 stock market crash, and increasing professionalism were making the art world a more mercenary place. Infected by the MBA-itis of that era, galleries became more corporate and a new wave of artists and collectors aspired to make money from their pursuits. "In the '60s and '70s, the art world still operated on esthetic values," said Hudson. "By the late '80s, business values were creating a more investment-driven marketplace."

In the late '80s and early '90s Feature was one of a new generation of SoHo galleries with similarly intrepid programs. Some, like Andrea Rosen and David Zwirner, later became Chelsea powerhouses. For all its persistence—the gallery moved to Greene Street (SoHo) in 1994 and to 25th Street (Chelsea) in 1999—Feature has never achieved the same degree of visibility. In part, that's because becoming a big player has never been Hudson's

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motivation. As the independent curator and writer Robert Nickas says, "I don't think of Hudson as a dealer. He doesn't show just what he thinks he can sell, and he doesn't bend to fashion. He shows what he likes and believes in."

Avoiding fashion puts demands on the gallery's audience as well. "I firmly believe that viewers or collectors should go to the art," Hudson told me. "Art should not be delivered to them. I'm always amused to hear dealers talking up clients by telling them about an artist's upcoming exhibitions, inclusion in noted private or museum collections and so on—as if those things really make an artist or artwork better. Why isn't the bullshit of that house of cards transparent to listeners? It's far too rare that you hear someone speaking about how an artwork expresses itself; about what is inventive or engaging in the artist's use of materials; or about how the content impacts your thinking or emotional life. Those are the important issues. You'd think that museums, at least, might be interested in operating outside this socioeconomic structure; but they, too, seem caught up in the market-driven thinking of investment and entertainment, and aspire to the same high end."

In a similar spirit, Hudson avoids art fairs and auctions. "They're too much like buying sprees," he said. "I've heard colleagues refer to fairs as a necessary evil. My own feeling is that they can be useful in bringing art to areas beyond the familiar art capitals, or in creating new markets—but they have the vacuity of shopping malls."

There have been consequences for Hudson's way of doing business. The most obvious is that many of the better-known artists he has represented over the years have moved on. Artists like Ray and Pettibon, and later discoveries like Murakami, Shaw, Tom Friedman and Vincent Fecteau, left despite having achieved notable success at Feature. For many of them, Feature was their first gallery, so leaving was like leaving home. Privately, some admitted to wanting more full-service representation, but most described their decision in developmental terms—as a difficult but necessary step into the wider world. As Friedman, who moved to Gagosian in 2005, told me: "Having grown up in a gallery that was all about art, I wanted to see how the subtleties of my work would play in a larger environment—to see what differences having a larger megaphone would bring." Though Friedman left Gagosian in 2008—he now works exclusively with Stephen Friedman Gallery in London—his curiosity was shared by other people who have departed. Fecteau, who joined Matthew Marks Gallery in 2008, recalls, "I knew that showing with one particular gallery was not going to solve all my problems. The biggest problem for artists—the one that never goes away—is how to actually make the work."

Though their departures have sometimes had serious financial repercussions, Hudson is philosophical: "Artists move or get scooped up at a point when they want or are offered a level of museum and international collector access that I can't provide. This doesn't happen only to Feature; it's part of the food chain, a game of musical chairs that provides the more established galleries with relatively low-cost product. When an artist leaves, I'm freed up to do other things—there are always interesting artists on my horizon."

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The collectors who have kept Feature in business tend not to be boldface names. Hudson explained that while some of them also buy hot artists from more prominent galleries, "most of the people I work with have something personal going on in their collections that encourages them to look farther afield." He avoids advising clients about what to buy and sell. "I prefer to turn those questions back to the asker or to approach them from a different point of view. The collectors I work with make their own decisions—they don't rely on reviews or advisors. Occasionally they make what might be called mistakes, but even that can be a good thing: you can learn a lot—about yourself, the art and the art world—when that happens."

Lily van der Stokker: *Curlicue*, 1994, acrylic paint on wall, 15 ¾ by 13 ¾ feet.

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DURING OUR CONVERSATION, Hudson related the story of an artist friend who had a day job doing high-end flower arranging: "The florist had new clients, a couple. My friend had visited their home a few times and been impressed with their art collection. One day they were at home while he was there, and he said, 'This art is amazing—it must have taken you years to put together.' And the reply was, 'Oh no, we bought it all last year.' At first, I was horrified, but then it dawned on me that the art might yet have the last word. When you live with art—once your initial interactions fade—a kind of osmosis takes over and you absorb all kinds of things just by being in its proximity. You may not be paying attention to it, but it is paying attention to you."

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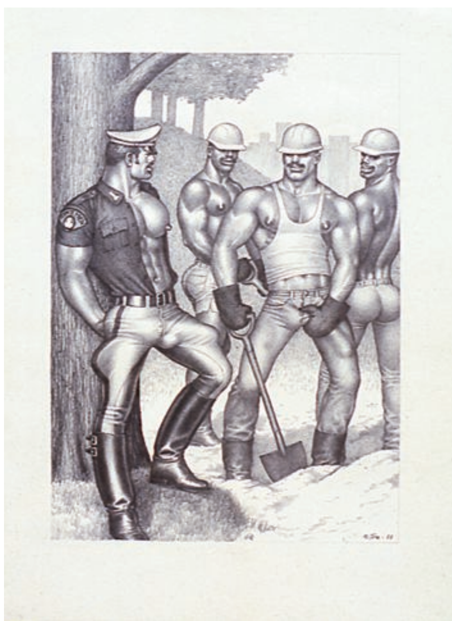
I asked Hudson to describe how he looked at art. "The first thing is to be quiet, to drop my agenda or expectations, and listen," he explained. "Then, I soften my gaze. The eyes are aggressive, and once you realize they are out there hunting, you can learn to tune them down, and let what is out there come to you. The body knows things way before the brain does. My favorite thing is to have a silent one-on-one session with an artwork, and then go do other things, before thinking or talking about the experience." He continued: "Art is primarily about the development of consciousness, not the development of an object. The object is just a catalyst."

Feature's program continues to explore the new and unknown, often tapping truly unexpected bodies of work. Ever since the mid-'90s—and most recently last March—the gallery has exhibited small, anonymous tantra paintings on paper from India. Used as meditation devices, these are traditional images—their iconography hasn't changed in centuries—that are still being painted today by reverent tantra practitioners, not all of whom are artists. And in June, after an almost 15-year hiatus, Feature again showed drawings by Tom of Finland (1920-1991), whose work is celebrated as much for its refined draftsmanship as for its provocative subject matter. "Tom codified the utopian gay macho stud look 25 years before that oversexed type became the dominant model of the homo world," Hudson told me. He has never thought of these works—or the tantra paintings—as being in any way outside of art. "That type of pigeonholing is condescending, ignorant actually," he said.

Today Feature represents more than 30 artists, five of whom—Michael Banicki, Richard Rezac, Nancy Shaver, Kevin Wolff and B. Wurtz—first exhibited with the gallery back in Chicago. Its current program centers on what Shaver describes as "bricks and mortar art": painting, drawing, photography and sculpture. In its early years, Feature had monthly video nights. "But," Hudson said, "these days, there's too much recycling, or watering down, of familiar forms in video, and far too much entertainment—though when I first saw Ryan Trecartin's videos on YouTube, I thought something had finally broken through."



Above, Nancy Shaver: *Valances Balanced*, 2006, metal rods, wood, wire and mixed mediums, 98½ by 40 by 46 inches.

Left, Tom of Finland: Untitled, 1988, pencil on paper, 15½ by 11½ inches.

Hudson believes that making art involves producing a form of representation—making a picture. "Many artists avoid the responsibility that that requires, because it demands so much rigor and uncertainty," he said. "The picture is of something inside them, or a response to something in the world. To do either is everything. Art-making is an old form, and that's important to remember when you get involved with the art world. Making a picture (or a thing) and looking at a picture (or a thing) are quite primitive, primal experiences—and they remain so despite all our technologies and ideas." ○

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