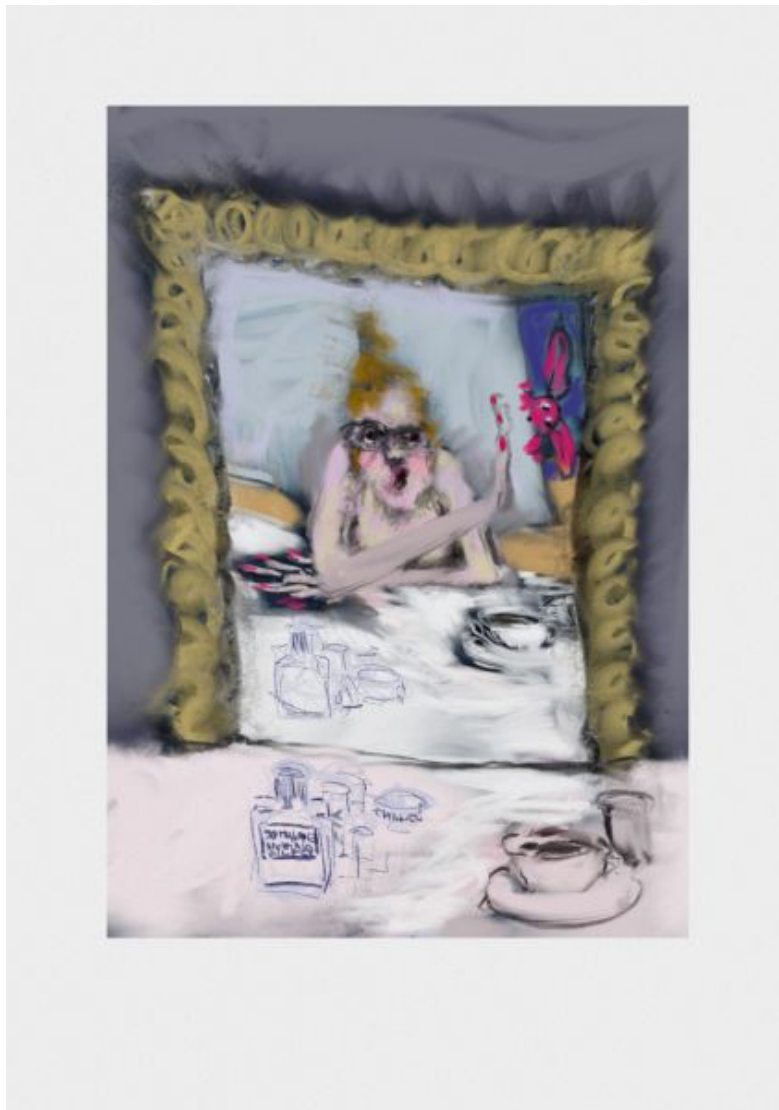


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On Zien, Buying Contemporary Art Comes With the Thrill of a Limited Edition ‘Drop’

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By Helen Holmes



Artwork by Eva Beresin that was included in Zien's last drop. Zien

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Purchasing contemporary art is an activity that comes with many high barriers to entry: you have to have amassed considerable wealth, good connections are a must and a widespread mental rolodex of galleries doesn't hurt either. Recently, however, artists and industry innovators have come to the conclusion that conditions like these are restrictive and outdated. Why shouldn't artists release limited editions of their work online so that customers who may be in lower income brackets can enjoy their output? Why shouldn't platforms exist to facilitate these sorts of transactions? One of these services is Zien, a new endeavor from founder Peter Holsgrove, that functions about as simply as possible; you don't even need to download an app.

Instead, a user simply has to text "Hi" on WhatsApp to Zien's number in order to be added to the "drop list." Approximately every two weeks, an artist will drop a limited amount of Scarce Editions of their work on Zien, and everyone who visits the platform in time has the change to snag one of the editions and download it. In order to increase your chances of obtaining a Scarce Edition, you can pay to improve your position in line or share news of the drop with your friends. During Zien's most recent drop, which featured six Scarce Editions from the artist Eva Beresin, all the files were claimed by people in the first group of potential collectors. Once you've claimed a Scarce Edition, the next (optional) step is to pay to have it fabricated.

"Fabrication is dependent on the type of work," Holsgrove told Observer in an interview on Thursday. "So it could be print, it could be a 3-D printed object, it could also be a certain set of instructions. For example, if you collect the Scarce Addition, you could also go somewhere and meet the artist at some point to have your portrait painted. It could be a whole variety of different things."

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The infinite possibilities generated by contemporary art also help to lend the platform a bit of mystique. Ultimately, though, the project is entirely about finding new ways for artists to support themselves in an often confusing and byzantine industry.

“When people pay to upgrade the drop, the artists generate income from that and also when people buy work at full prices, that’s also how they generate income,” Holsgrove added. “Right now, 100 percent of the revenue goes to artists because it is super experimental. We’re still trying to figure this thing out, and we want to try and create a sort of landscape where the majority of the income from drops is going to artists. Whereas Zien, we might take a commission from something within reason, we’d make between 10 to 30 percent depending on the amount of work that was required for a drop.”

In essence, Holsgrove said, Zien is the product of innumerable direct conversations with artists about how best to reach new audiences and form meaningful relationships with collectors. By building a minimal, WhatsApp-based platform where excitement is generated surrounding timed drops, much like the wildly successful strategy employed by streetwear brands like Supreme, Holsgrove is hoping to create “a legitimate new distribution channel for contemporary art.”