

'Follow Me' photographer Murad Osmann on social media and its impact on the art industry

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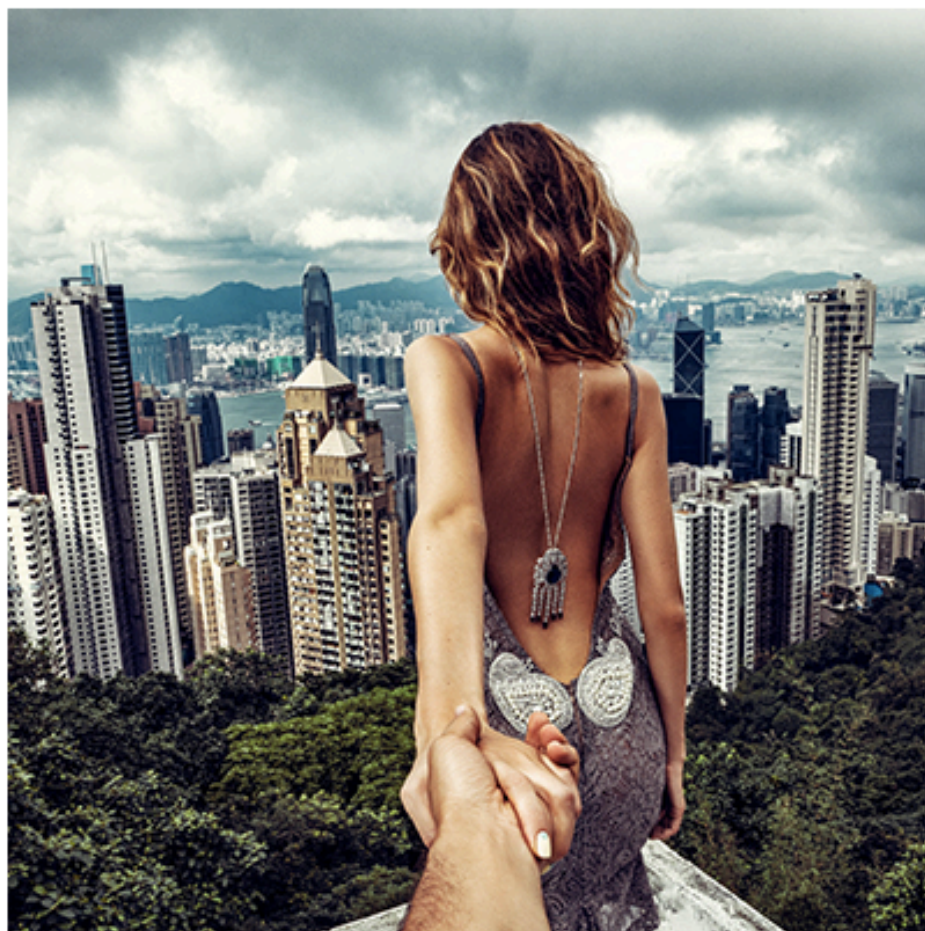


Murad Osmann talks about his millions of Instagram followers, the rise of social media and its impact on the art industry

Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, Pinterest. The world of social media is alive and well. According to an article published earlier this year in British newspaper the *Daily Telegraph*, on average, nearly a third of the time people spend on the internet is spent on social media sites. Outside of older age groups, you'd be hard pressed to find someone who shuns all forms of social media. But is it really, as the name implies, a purely social platform? In the modern art world, who uses these networks and to what end? Is social media friend or foe for today's artists?

According to Alexandra Choa, it's both a blessing and a curse. Choa is perhaps more qualified than most to comment on this. She serves as communications manager at Leo Gallery and chairs the Young Friends of the Art Museum CUHK association – a networking platform established in order to engage people in Hong Kong's emerging arts community and to raise the profile of budding artists. Choa has also been instrumental in the development of a new mobile platform that would facilitate the networking of designers, artists and retailers alike. "It's good in a sense – artists can increase their exposure." She continues, "It depends on the type, but art can lose its value when it is reproduced. Take the *Mona Lisa*. Online, it loses its pure, beautiful essence. We see and feel these things in very different ways."

What then of contemporary art? "In a sense, some of it is meant to be replicated – it can be an expression of a particular moment at a particular time," says Choa. Such specificity is undoubtedly suited to the instantaneous nature of many of these platforms. There may be no better example of this than Murad Osmann. A Google search of the artist's name delivers a link to his Instagram account as the first result. With 3.2 million followers, Osmann is heralded as a 'social media artist', though upon speaking with him he rejects the label. "I would rather call myself an artist that gained popularity on social media," he says.



Reaching audiences the world over with his popular #FollowMeTo series, Osmann and his wife, Nataly, have created high contrast, visually striking portraits of Nataly leading him across the world. Not only do Osmann's fans have direct, seemingly unlimited access to his work, but they have become involved in its inception. "The opportunity to communicate directly with the audience is one of the most impressive benefits of social media," he tells us. This brings to the fore an entirely new dynamic – a situation in which audiences can contribute to the art they appreciate.

The concern here, however, is that the artist may lose a level of agency to which they were previously accustomed, since art has arguably never been so public. Are artists now bound by contemporary social trends – relegated to a life of hashtags, square format images and a life dictated by the number of 'likes'? To say so would certainly be reductive. "Instagram [has] influenced the way we spread the word about our art, but not the image itself. The only thing that has changed is the method of communication. It has become much easier to share art," claims Osmann. Choa echoes, "Art is a different form of expression. It can be an expression of a certain moment in time." A fleeting moment, a snapshot, captured in an instant – what better way to view these than through agencies that promote this very essence?

In the 21st century, says Choa, 'art has become a commodity – the value of it has changed. It comes down to competition and social media giving you more exposure'. Choa recently organised an exhibition titled *Climate Change*, where each artist featured in the exhibition was found, one way or another, online. "I used Facebook, I asked for artist portfolios after finding their Instagram accounts," she explains. Ultimately, says Choa, "These platforms, they can be invaluable for artists, if they know how to use them." Words that resonate with Osmann, who confirms, "It's not social media that poses any restrictions, it is ourselves." *Amanda Sheppard*

To see more of Osmann's #FollowMeTo series, visit [instagram.com/muradosmann](https://www.instagram.com/muradosmann).