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In an Explosive Lawsuit, Lehmann Maupin Gallery Accuses an Ex-Employee of Stealing Valuable Client Data and Trade Secrets

The employee joined Lévy Gorvy last fall.

Eileen Kinsella, January 22, 2019



Co-owners Rachel Lehmann and David Maupin. Photo: Clint Spaulding/PatrickMcMullan.com

Lehmann Maupin Gallery is suing a former employee, accusing her of deceit, dishonesty, and theft in a case that underscores how valuable client relationships are in the competitive gallery business—especially in fast-growing and lucrative markets like Asia.

The gallery initially filed suit in late November, and filed an updated complaint on January 14 in federal district court in New York. It alleges that Bona Yoo, a former director who is now working at Lévy Gorvy gallery as a sales director, “surreptitiously copied valuable trade secrets” from Lehmann Maupin’s computer systems before she left and “maliciously corrupted” or deleted important information from the gallery’s database.

Yoo’s plan, according to the lawsuit, was designed to impede the gallery’s business while simultaneously allowing her to use the information for her own financial gain at another gallery. (Lévy Gorvy is not named in the suit.)

With its lawsuit, Lehmann Maupin says it wants to prevent Yoo from gaining an unfair competitive advantage and recover damages it says it incurred when Yoo corrupted or deleted confidential information. Attorneys for Lehmann Maupin did not comment beyond the details contained in the complaint.



Bona Yoo. Image courtesy of Lévy Gorvy

Dominique Lévy, a partner of Lévy Gorvy, told artnet News that she and the gallery stand behind Yoo and are “tremendously saddened” by the claims. Lévy said that from the first indication that Lehmann Maupin was concerned and upset, she reached out directly to co-founder Rachel Lehmann, whom she has known for 20 years, to try to reach an agreement. “The art world is not the place for this aggressive behavior,” she said.

“Lehmann Maupin brought this lawsuit purely out of spite towards a former employee who, in Lehmann Maupin’s own words, was ‘a valuable leader at the gallery,’” Yoo’s attorney Tibor Nagy told artnet News via email. “Ms. Yoo intends to vigorously defend herself against her former employer’s baseless and vengeful claims.”

Lehmann Maupin, which operates spaces in New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul, says it first began working with Yoo as a consultant in 2015. She was hired full-time as an associate director in 2017 and later named director, the highest position available. But in October 2018, the suit alleges, Yoo “blindsided” the gallery when she gave notice that she was leaving “to expand another art gallery’s presence in Asia (and Korea specifically),” thus becoming a direct competitor.

Yoo initially gave the gallery only one day’s notice, though eventually she agreed to stay on five days longer, until October 23, 2018.

Roughly a week later, on November 1, Lévy Gorvy—which operates offices or galleries in New York, London, and Shanghai—announced that Yoo had joined as a sales director. After her departure, “it became readily apparent why Bona Yoo was rushing to end her relationship with Lehmann Maupin Gallery,” the suit alleges.

In the course of trying to reassign Yoo’s clients to other gallery staff, Lehmann Maupin directors say that they uncovered “substantial alterations to certain client information contained in ArtBase,” an inventory management and client contact system. Included among the alterations, it says, were “wholesale deletions of client notes (some dating back years)” which the gallery relies on extensively to market artwork to clients.

The suit alleges that in some cases, Yoo deleted a client’s correct personal information and replaced it with fake information. The gallery retained a computer forensics specialist to examine the situation further and claims that “to date, the vendor has discovered that, in addition to the ArtBase alterations, Bona Yoo purged hundreds of files” from her gallery-associated cloud storage in the week preceding her departure.

Although, according to the complaint, the full extent of the data loss remains unknown, Lehmann Maupin maintains the deleted files contain “key information” it needs to execute its business strategy in Asia generally, and Korea specifically. The gallery further alleges that Yoo “transferred certain internal files to herself prior

to her departure,” and went to “particularly great lengths” to secure two “extremely valuable client files at the expense of the gallery.”

The complaint alleges misappropriation of trade secrets in violation of the Defend Trade Secrets Act, violation of the Stored Communication Act, misappropriation of confidential information under New York Law, breach of a confidentiality agreement, and other claims.

Yoo’s response is due by January 29. In between the filing of the first and amended complaints, Lehmann Maupin succeeded in getting Judge Alison J. Nathan to sign off on a protective order on December 11 that assures the information in question will be kept confidential throughout the course of litigation.