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NOVEMBER 2011

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ON THE BLOCK

Endless research and self-analysis must be part and parcel of the serious art collector's approach—if he is to avoid being seduced by the thrill of the chase

By Robbie Antonio

I spent almost half of my life in the US and a considerable amount of time in New York. I have always considered NYC as the mecca of art collecting. About 10% of the top 200 collectors in the world live in New York, and I have been fortunate enough to have become friends with some of them and see their private collections. I have been to almost every major museum in the world, but I never really appreciated art as much as I did when I started collecting. I have flown as far as Denmark for a mere five hours to preview an exhibit prior to the collection being opened to the public. When the Grand Palais hosted the Warhol exhibit between March and July 2009 featuring close to 200 portraits of Warhol, I flew to Paris on a Friday afternoon and returned back to New York by Monday morning on three separate occasions just to see the exhibit. I simply could not get enough of it. My weekends in New York were filled with gallery hopping with close collector friends and having lunch with art dealers. During my weekends at the MoMA, I would spend hours gazing at Matisse's *Red Room*, Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, Jasper John's *Target with Four Faces*, Paul Gauguin's *The Moon and the Earth*, and Cezanne's *Milk Can and Apples*. In order to study various genres of art, I had to expose myself to a myriad of pieces: impressionism, conceptualism, abstract, abstract expressionism, action painting, cubism, pop art, video art, surrealism, photography, minimalism (and the list goes on). I began collecting established European and American modern, post war and contemporary masters.

A critic once said, "Very few people ever understand art. If you are lucky, they will buy



COLLECT CALL

Prince Seelso Bereng Seeiso of Lesotho stands beside English billionaire and jeweler Laurence Graff, who owns one of the most impressive collections of contemporary art worldwide.



it for the wrong reasons.” Indeed, collecting is an esoteric subject. One must be able to ascertain good art from great art, possess the ability to spot trends, but most of all, have a sincere passion for collecting.

My philosophy towards collecting is razor sharp. When I look at an artist’s work, I look at the entire body of work of the artist and focus on pieces I appreciate the most for a specific reason. The four most important factors in all my acquisition for any artist include the subject, quality, provenance, and price. For example, it isn’t enough for me to want to get another Warhol; I tell myself repeatedly, I must either have a Marilyn reversal, self-portrait, diamond dust shoe, or a Mona Lisa. If I cannot elucidate to myself why I want an artist and the rationale behind owning a specific piece, then I feel I am not looking at that artist/piece for the right reasons. As for quality, I always ask myself, has the painting ever been restored? Who owned the painting contributes to the overall status of the piece: did it come from an important collector? As far as prices are concerned, I would like to think that I follow the art market as closely as George Soros follows the financial markets, Steve Wynn the casino industry, and David Geffen the

movie industry.

My ideal collection would be comprised of a Picasso 1932 *Marie-Thérèse* or a 1938 *Dora Maar* painting, a Monet *Nymphéas*, a Van Gogh self-portrait, a superb Matisse, a Warhol 1964 *Marilyn*, a Francis Bacon *Pope*, a red large Mark Rothko, a 50s Pollock drip, a Modigliani portrait of a woman, a Piet Mondrian painting, a 1984 Basquiat painting, and sculptures by Giacometti, Calder, Brancusi, and Cattelan. Oh, let’s not forget a great Jeff Koons hanging heart sculpture and a Damien Hirst formaldehyde piece.

THE ART FAIRS

There are over a hundred art fairs in a year that one can attend depending on his or her focus. Since I started collecting over five years ago, I have been going to Art Basel (both Miami and Switzerland) every year. Openings of the most important art fairs and exhibitions remind me of the kind of exhilaration one gets in Monaco for the Grand Prix or in Cannes for the Film Festival. All of the who’s who of various industries and from all over the world show up. During Basel, it was natural to bump into Brad Pitt (an important art and furniture collector); Roman Abramovich (rumored to



“VERY FEW PEOPLE EVER UNDERSTAND ART. IF YOU ARE LUCKY, THEY WILL BUY IT FOR THE WRONG REASONS.”

have bought an entire collection of Rothkos for \$310 million) and his partner Dasha Zhukova; as well as supermodel Stephanie Seymour, who together with Peter Brant, is one of the largest private collectors of contemporary art in the world. Other regular fixtures include Calvin Klein, as well as rappers Pharrell Williams and Kanye West (who are big fans of Murakami). Going to the Venice Biennale to see Gucci owner Francois Pinault's contemporary collection in Palazzo Grassi provides one a jaw dropping experience.

THE AUCTIONS

The auctions are interesting because it gives you a glimpse of which collector or dealer is bidding and for which pieces. Needless to

say, the attendees for the evening auctions are strictly by invitation for the world's top collectors and dealers. It would not be uncommon to spot Valentino or Marc Jacobs in the front row. Interestingly, at times, there are surprises. A few months ago in London at a Sotheby's auction, chaos broke out in the auction hall as a dozen art activists screamed and threw counterfeit money into the air. Stunned and impassive bidders watched as the activists unfurled a red banner near the auctioneer's podium that read: "Orgy of the Rich." For all too brief a moment the self-possessed world of the oligarchs came to a screeching halt. Before Sotheby's security had time to forcefully throw them out *en masse*, the protesters left the auction hall to stage a demonstration

with around 100 of their compatriots in the street outside.

PRIVATE ENCOUNTERS

Just last May in New York, I was invited to a dinner of about 20 collectors. One of them was Laurence Graff of Graff jewelry whom I always see in New York for the auctions and in Basel in June. I have always admired this man's taste in diamonds and art. I told him that I love his collection of Basquiats, Yves Kleins, and Warhols. He smiled and acknowledged the statement.

Six years and many mistakes with art purchases (as well as countless art fairs and auctions) later, I must say—I can't live without art.

Some things will never change. □