

# Do Chicago collectors overlook Chicago art?



By KEVIN NANCE

A Chicago art collector was chatting with painter Wesley Kimler not long ago, proudly describing some of his recent acquisitions—none of which, as it happened, were by artists based in the Windy City. Was the collector, Kimler wanted to know, familiar with the local art scene? Did he purchase work by artists from Chicago as well as from elsewhere? “Well,” the collector said, “I’m not into Roger Brown.” Kimler then reminded the collector that Brown had been dead for quite a number of years, which brought the conversation to a quick conclusion.

The exchange was both telling and, as Kimler and some other Chicago artists see it, mad-denyingly typical. In their view, many of the city’s deep-pocket art collectors have become increasingly disconnected from, and neglectful of, the local art community since the high-flying heyday of the Imagists. When these collectors buy art, the theory goes, they look to New York or Los Angeles, or to art fairs in Miami or London or Basel—anywhere, it seems, but their own back yard.

“Almost none of the big collectors here buy anything from local artists,” Kimler asserts. “They’ll buy work by New York artists or Los Angeles artists, but they don’t have the guts to support what’s here.” As for the argument that collectors’ buying habits are simply a reflection of an art world that’s become more international and borderless, Kimler shrugs. “It’s the excuse that’s always given, but it’s a false argument. It’s totally different, for example, in L.A., where people like Eli Broad collect internationally but also locally. They support those artists in their own home town, and in doing so have built up the L.A. art scene in a way that hasn’t happened here in Chicago over the past 20 years, which is a shame.” Gallery owner Tom McCormick says, “I think in the years of yore, back in the ’60s, ’70s, ’80s, it seemed like there was more of a sense of place among Chicago collectors, a sense of pride in collecting your local artists. Now, as a general rule, I don’t see it.”

In this way of thinking, Chicago collectors are particularly attracted by the collective reputation of the art scene in New York, which still lays claim to—and jealously guards—the title of America’s most important art center. A painting or piece of sculpture purchased there carries with it an implied seal of approval from the larger art world, validating the buyer’s choice by the simple but apparently irresistible magic of association with the Big Apple. “There’s a great percentage of the collecting class in Chicago that

never looks here to buy,” says collage artist Tony Fitzpatrick. “Of course, it was also that way 20 years ago. I was at the Armory Show [in New York] in 2003 and a guy from Chicago bought two of my pieces there. I said, ‘You live six blocks from my studio.’ But his attitude was, ‘I buy in New York.’ Collectors don’t want to be perceived as rubes, and they love the reflected glamour of walking into a gallery in Chelsea.”

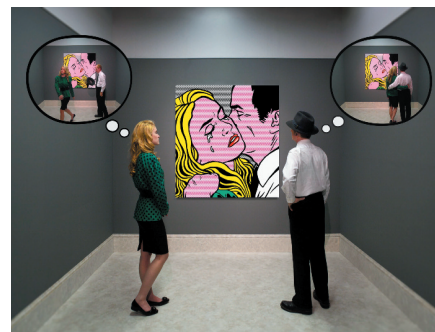
This premise is challenged, if not rejected outright, by many Chicago collectors, who express little sense of obligation to support local artists but deny any bias against them in favor of their counterparts in New York or elsewhere. “Collectors are looking for examples of work by artists they like, and they’re going to discover it and buy it wherever it happens to be displayed,” says Howard Tullman, who adds that nearly a quarter of his collection of several hundred works is by Chicago artists. “To me, it’s not about being associated with a New York gallery, because I see interesting work coming out of New Orleans, San Francisco, Boston, Colorado, London, various places in Germany, you name it. We’re in a global economy, and I work with galleries from everywhere. If I had my druthers, I would always buy from a Chicago gallery, but of course it doesn’t always work that way. Carl Hammer does a good job of occasionally bringing in an artist who’s represented elsewhere, and the issue becomes where do you buy? I might buy from Carl, or from some other gallery in New York or L.A., depending on who’s got the best example of a certain artist’s work.”

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- Collector Howard Tullman*

Jack Guthman is even more vehement in his rejection of the image of Chicago collectors as neglecting home-grown product. “I don’t subscribe to that theory whatsoever,” says Guthman, who, with his wife, Sandra, has amassed a large collection by artists around the world, including several from Chicago. “We’ve bought pieces by Curtis Mann, Laura Letinsky, Theaster Gates, Melanie Schiff, Judy Ledgerwood and lots of others. And you’ve got a lot of Chicago galleries who are very good about representing Chicago artists, from Rhona Hoffman and Kavi Gupta to Monique Meloche and Corbett vs. Dempsey. It’s not like Chicago artists are hidden under a barrel.” Asked what percentage of his collection is by local artists, however, Guthman

bristles. “That’s not how you judge people’s collections,” he says. “Percentages? I don’t think that’s very meaningful.”

And yet the perception of Chicago collectors bedazzled by the glitter of New York or the gleaming finish of L.A.—to the point at which they become blind to the achievements of equally fine, equally deserving hometown artists—is not entirely a figment of the artists’ imagination and/or a projection of their insecurity. “I hear it all the time, and there is a reality in the fact that collectors like to buy elsewhere,” says Catherine Edelman of the Catherine Edelman Gallery and president of the Chicago Art Dealers Association. “There’s the cachet of saying, ‘Oh, I bought this in New York’—or L.A. or Paris or Tokyo, or wherever they may be. The collectors get really excited by this, and I can’t really fault them—it’s human nature that we like to travel, and when we travel, we like to buy things. But the phenomenon is not Chicago-specific. I was just up in Toronto at an art fair talking to another dealer, and he said the same thing.” McCormick agrees, “This is the 800 pound gorilla that we all know about—of course people like to buy in New York. It’s no big secret, and certainly nothing new, that there’s a certain type of collector who, given the choice of buying a work by an artist in a fancy New York gallery or from their local gallery in Chicago, they’re going to buy in New York. They might even be willing to pay more just for the privilege.”



Gregory Scott, *Dialogue*, 2011, 32" x 48" archival digital print, silkscreen on vinyl, oil on panel, and HD video. Ed. of 6 with 2 AP's. Courtesy Catherine Edelman Gallery.

What *is* Chicago-specific, at least in relation to New York and L.A., is the relatively low national and international profile of the art scene here—of which Chicago collectors, with their understandable interest in who’s hot and who’s not, can’t fail to be aware. From the late 1960s through the mid-’80s, “the Imagists were ruling the art world,” as the painter Phyllis Bramson recalls—in large part through the agency of gallerist Phyllis Kind—“and we all got a piece of that cake.” Since then, however, the art world’s interest



Curtis Mann (b. 1979), *removal, two sides*, Chemically altered chromogenic development print, 2010, 40" x 100", unique, KGG-2004  
Collection of Sandy and Jack Guthman

in Chicago artists seems to have cooled, despite the efforts of the Chicago Cultural Center (including its annual Chicago Artists Month), the Museum of Contemporary Art (through its recently retired 12 x 12 series featuring local artists), Art Chicago and other entities. Part of this is traceable to the decline of visual art coverage in the city; as Edelman ruefully points out, neither the *Chicago Tribune* nor the *Chicago Sun-Times* currently has a staff art critic. By contrast, the *New York Times* maintains two full-time art critics, while the *Los Angeles Times* has one. Magazines such as *ARTnews*, *Artforum* and *Art in America*—all based in New York—focus most heavily on the art scene in their hometown, with Chicago artists and galleries receiving relatively scant mention.

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- artist Phyllis Bramson***

Just as artists benefit from publicity and promotion, so do art communities. Nowhere has this been more amply demonstrated than in Los Angeles, whose artists have been blessed with a champion in Lyn Kienholz. Through her California / International Arts Foundation, founded in 1980, the unassuming networker-impresario has worked tirelessly to raise awareness of Los Angeles art and artists through exhibitions, publications and other projects around the world. As noted by Barbara Isenberg in a preface to Kienholz’s *L.A. Rising: SoCal Artists Before 1980*, a new encyclopedia of Southern California artists, the foundation has organized exhibitions in 56 museums in 23 countries, including a show of large-scale sculpture by local artists as part of the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival (which then toured internationally) and *Los Angeles: 1955-1985*, an exhibition of about 350 works by 87 artists shown in 2006 at the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

L.A.’s other guardian angel is the Getty Foundation, which initiated (and provided more than \$10 million in grants for) Pacific Standard Time, a six-month series of exhibitions at more than 60 institutions that kicked off this past fall and continues through this spring. If the larger art world had doubts about Los Angeles as a crucible of serious culture, Pacific Standard Time is determined to put them to rest.

By contrast, a campaign of this type or scale seems unlikely in the Windy City, where many artists and art-world figures are uncomfortable with, if not actively antagonistic to, the idea of promoting the concept of “Chicago art.” The push for a museum devoted to Chicago art and artists, led by Paul Klein and others a few years ago, was stymied in part by a commonly expressed fear of “ghettoizing” Chicago artists by placing them in a regional context. “I find this attitude particularly vexing,” Bramson says. “Does a Los Angeles artist balk at being called that? Do they feel ghettoized by saying that they are a Los Angeles artist? Of course not.” Adds McCormick, “There has always been a strong chauvinism among West Coast people for West Coast art, but for some reason there hasn’t ever been that kind of Midwest chauvinism. For that reason I think it’s been a mistake to try to market yourself as a Chicago artist, because the collectors here haven’t shown much of an interest in that.”

What the Chicago art scene needs, Kimler believes, is some of the collective guts and gumption of the city’s theater community, which regularly asserts itself by embracing its local roots. “If anything could unite the Chicago art scene now, it might be to follow the example of Steppenwolf and the other theater people here who have made Chicago the most important city in the world in terms of that art form,” Kimler says. “Theater here doesn’t take a back seat to New York, so why should visual art? We should think really hard about that.”

Let’s get thinking.