

SHOW US YOUR WALL

When a Mentor Said Tear Down Your Collection and Start Over, They Did

Would you make a purchase based solely on a JPEG from an artist's Instagram page? No problem.

By [Jori Finkel](#)

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LOS ANGELES — Many contemporary art collectors have an adviser. Arthur Lewis is lucky enough to have a mentor, instead. A decade ago, Mr. Lewis, then a merchandising executive at the Gap, and his partner, Hau Nguyen, who owns hair salons, invited the collector Joy Simmons to their home here, where they had art by popular provocateurs like Jeff Koons and Paul McCarthy.

She was not impressed. “Joy told us we have to take everything off our walls and start all over again,” Mr. Lewis said. “She said we have an opportunity to make some impact by collecting artists who are not getting their moment to shine, artists in our own community.”

“I’m really grateful for what she said,” he added. “It helped us discover our passion as collectors: artists who tell stories that we understand personally as two people of color.”

Now, they own a range of work by emerging black artists and those already in demand, like Amy Sherald (who painted Michelle Obama’s portrait in 2018) and Kerry James Marshall (whose work set an auction record that year for living black artists). There’s also a strong Los Angeles contingent, including Lauren Halsey, Genevieve Gaignard and Diedrick Brackens.

In 2012 the couple renovated their Italianate home to create more space, and more walls, for art. Last year, Mr. Lewis turned his avocation into a vocation, taking a job at United Talent Agency, overseeing the division representing visual artists in entertainment and licensing deals. This team also runs an unconventional gallery, UTA Artist Space. It has a show of fiery figurative paintings by Arcmanoro Niles opening Feb. 12, in time for Frieze Los Angeles. These are edited excerpts from a conversation with Mr. Lewis.



Two works from Jennie C. Jones’s “Breathless” series, in which a tangled Kenny G cassette tape is the medium. Brian Guido for The New York Times

Which artists have you developed relationships with?

We know many of the artists really well. Collecting is so personal for us. It's our pillow talk, our down time. We like to go deep and collect their full narrative, like we did with Jennie C. Jones, who tends to work with and around sound and music. We met her many years ago, and I think we've collected a work from Jennie every year since then. It was not just getting to know her work but getting to know her, so she's family now.

The collecting category of "black artists" has become very strong lately — some would say trendy. Is this a good thing?

I'm so excited that these geniuses are being recognized for their enormous talent. As long as sustainable careers are being created for these artists, I think it's a very good thing. When I have caution is when a frenzy occurs around certain artists at certain moments. I watched what just happened at Art Basel in Miami with Amoako Bofo: The Rubells made him their artist in residence at their new museum and Mariane Ibrahim [a Chicago gallerist] gave him a solo booth at the fair, and my phone goes nuts. Collectors who know I own his work are calling me, asking: Is there anything left?



From left, Ferrari Shepard's "I Like Coffee, I Like Tea" (2019); Tschabalala Self's "Bodega Run" (2015); in background, Jamea Richmond-Edwards's "Wings Not Meant to Fly" (2012); in far background, Bethany Collins's "May 11, 1963" (2017); a Karon Davis sculpture, "Ishmael" (2017), center, near piano; and "Joy Ede" (2018), by Amoako Bofo. On mantel, from left, Kehinde Wiley's "After La Nègresse, 1872" (2006) and "The Goddess of Democracy" by the Propeller Group. Brian Guido for The New York Times

Which artwork in your home is the biggest conversation starter?

When you walk in, the first thing you see is Titus Kaphar's "Enough About You," based on a painting owned by Yale. In the original painting, this young black boy was shown in shackles, subservient to the university benefactors. So Titus recreated the narrative in a painting that was even larger, 10 by 10 feet, but he crumpled the part of the canvas with the men to make the little boy the hero. His ability to reposition a story is something I find extraordinary.

In your retail career you're known for building brands. Do visual artists today need to think about that as well?

Yes, and I think they are all brand-masters. Mickalene Thomas's rhinestones are part of these beautiful settings that she puts forward, and Genevieve Gaignard's ability to make the everyday object seem extraordinary is part of the brand she's built. And I love the way that Instagram has changed the art world, with an artist curating their page, their brand, their identity on social media, so that you get what their work is.

Do you ever buy a work by JPEG without seeing it in person?

All the time. Once we know the artist, we're usually pretty good to go off a JPEG. It hasn't failed us yet.

Correction: Feb. 12, 2020

An earlier version of a caption accompanying this article misidentified a sculpture by the Propeller Group. It is "The Goddess of Democracy," not "Miss America."

A version of this article appears in print on Feb. 14, 2020, Section C, Page 14 of the New York edition with the headline: Starting Over, and Ending Up Grateful