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Around the World in 80 days: Peripatetic Collectors Monique and Max Burger

BY JANINE CIRINCIONE

Monique and Max Burger are contemporary art collectors with a mission that extends far beyond simply acquiring artworks for their own enjoyment. Through the Burger Collection, now comprising over 1,000 works by 120 artists from around the world, the Burgers seek to cultivate artistic dialogue, share their artworks with the public via exhibitions and a comprehensive website, and engage in philanthropic activities that promote the careers of emerging artists internationally. But what is perhaps most impressive about the Burger Collection is that it is not merely international, but truly global in its scope and outreach.

Like many who are included in the ARTnews top 200 Collectors list, the Burgers began simply and humbly with the acquisition of a David Hockney poster in 1979. They started seriously collecting in the 1990s, buying art whenever they traveled, which was, and still is, often. For Swiss-born Monique and Max, self-described globe-trotters who currently live in Hong Kong, collecting art from the farthest reaches of India or China is a vital part of what they do to connect deeply to a culture they are visiting and exploring. “Art of my time always was something magic to me,” says Monique, “impelling me to reconsider who I am and what I want. It is not a question of picking winners; it is a question of paying attention to those artists who are making interesting contributions, because what you get is not only what you see, but also what you learn. When my husband, Max, and I started



Mrs. Monique Burger, Courtesy Burger Collection, Hong Kong.

buying art in the mid-90s, our choices were mostly based on intuition. We did not follow specific themes, motifs or media, but we were always inspired by artists who had a powerful point of view on political, mythological or philosophical topics.”

Almost any major art collection today is international, i.e., comprised of works from artists of myriad nationalities. But the term globalism implies something much deeper. According to political scientist, Joseph Nye, globalism refers to “any description and explanation of a world which is characterized by networks of connections that span multi-continental distances.” In other words, globalism extends not just across national borders, but is a web of interconnected ideas and values. In the Burger Collection, a work by an artist of Indian heritage may be purchased in New York, stored in Zurich and then exhibited in Berlin, forming a true network or lattice of interconnected relationships. It is this principle of interconnectivity that is the key to understanding how all of the collecting, research and philanthropic activities form the coherent aesthetic and function of the Burger Collection.

Among the artists to enter the Burger collection early on, Urs Fischer may best exemplify the spirit of their collecting. Fischer, a Swiss sculptor born in 1973, is known for his wry and ambitious Duchampian gestures that explore how materials and processes are an integral part of the way we perceive meaning and form. *You*, 2007, was an audacious sculpture made by excavating an 8-foot deep hole out of the entire floor of his New York gallery, Gavin Brown’s enterprise. “I was born and raised in Switzerland,” says Monique. “So was Urs Fischer. I saw his first solo show in Switzerland in early 2000 and I was hooked.” *Untitled*, 2001, a piece in the Burger Collection, is a life-size female form made of wax. A human-scaled candle, really, complete with wick, the piece is meant to be lit and slowly burned to the ground. A beautiful synthesis of function and form, its ephemeral nature begs the question, “ars longa, vita brevis,” or is it the other way around? The piece may be “used” and re-cast multiple times during the life of the work. “Using” the work, i.e., lending it to an exhibition where it will slowly be destroyed over the course of its display, is an integral part of its meaning. At its core, owning the piece requires a level of commitment to the artist and a stewardship of the work that many collectors would eschew.

To own a work means to care for it, not just to preserve its condition and value, but also to keep the work in dialogue with its culture. So,



Shirin Neshat, *Soraya (Zarin Series)*, 2005, C-print, 60 x 47 1/2 in. (152.4 x 120.7 cm) Copyright Shirin Neshat, Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York.



Urs Fischer, *You*, 2007, Installation view, Gavin Brown's enterprise NY, Image courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise.

like many collectors, the Burgers have become deeply committed philanthropists. They donate time, money and resources to a myriad of organizations that are, at best, peripheral to their collecting, but are critical to their desire to be a part of the process of building the avant-garde. Monique is on the Board of Directors of AAA (Asia Art Archive), an organization dedicated to archiving and disseminating research material related to contemporary Asian art. She is also on the advisory board of Art HK, the soaring new art fair that many believe after only three years is destined to become the most important contemporary art fair in Asia. While it is a paradox to ask the question, “Philanthropy, what’s in it for me?” the Burgers clearly enjoy a return on their charitable investment. For example, their generosity might help a struggling young artist to realize their first ambitious outdoor public work, or a museum pay for the cost of producing an exhibition catalogue, or, in the case of AAA, support the documentation of an entire underground art movement, long before it became popular or collectible. “I joined AAA, a non-profit organization and registered charity in Hong Kong, as a board member in 2009. AAA demonstrates an unflinching and committed engagement in the hugely important background work of art production, both contemporary and historical. It is this painstaking work behind the scenes resulting in an archive as research tool that in the end saves art from being forgotten. It is the archive that enables us to delve into the deeper issues involved in art; for example, the complex relationships of art to society and history. In the end, this gives us all the possibility to better understand art and its vital function for a whole culture.” In other words, the “return” for the Burgers is that in advancing dialogue between different voices and cultures, and certainly by encouraging more and more people to share their passion for collecting contemporary art, the Burgers continue to build the matrix of knowledge that informs their eye and refines their collecting savvy.

The philanthropic impulse also is what drove them to share their collection in numerous ways with the world. “While adding instruments of research and communication, our collection will continue to steadily grow and expand. It’s a reaction to and a stronger immersion into the ever more diversified and complex contemporary art practices worldwide. Also, I want to continue assuming responsibility as a collector, cultivating the artistic dialogue and creating and maintaining awareness for the holdings of the collection. Last but not least, it is about developing a vision for the future. It’s a process-oriented path and we now venture, more than ever, into collaborations with artists themselves, with art students, professionals and the public. I believe it will help me to access new ideas and to complete the picture of the Burger Collection in the future.”

But Monique, who enjoyed a career in international banking for many years, is not naive about how much of the art in the collection has



Norbert Schwontkowski, *Zur letzten Einkehr*, 2005, Oil on canvas, 23 2/3 x 19 2/3 in. (60 x 50), Courtesy Contemporary Fine Arts, Photo: Jochen Littkemann.



Fernando Bryce, *Bismarck TV*, 2008, Bismarck bust (bronze), 5 books (*Weltall und Menschheit*), monitoring camera, monitor, display case; 63 1/2 x 59 x 29 1/2 in. (161 x 150 x 75 cm), © Fernando Bryce, Photo by Toshimi Ogasawara.



Kara Walker, *The Long Hot Black Road to Freedom, a Double-Dixie Two-Step [detail]*, 2005-08, Cut paper and paint on wall, Dimensions variable: approx. 180 x 1800 in. (457.2 x 4572 cm), Installation view of Kara Walker: *The Black Road*, CAC Málaga, June 27 – August 30, 2008. Photo: José Luis Gutiérrez, Fotógrafo,

increased in value since they began to acquire it. “Over the last ten years, the universe of artists, museums, galleries, collectors, advisors, institutions and all other stake holders has grown, and this growth has brought with it much higher transparency and professionalism. The launch of your magazine is proof of that. One effect of this development is an appreciation of art as an asset class, and the effect of that is easier access of information and with it come higher valuations.” But when asked if she has ever sold a work of art, the answer was a simple no. “Buying works of art means, in our case, that we want to follow the artist’s development over many years and add more works to the collection. Selling is not an issue. Many of the younger and lesser known artists’ presence in the collection will steadily grow in the future, among them, Fiete Stolte, Vittorio Santoro, Titus Kaphar or Ricky Swallow, to just name a few. To follow a career from the start and to reflect that in our collection and activities seems like a good policy to us.”

It is a milestone in the life of every collector when they run out of wall space. How this dilemma is faced determines the future of the collection activities. Some collectors simply stop buying, choosing to live with and look at their cherished objects every day. Others begin a lifelong process of de-accessioning and trading, using gains in the value of certain works to fund a whole new round of acquisitions. Then, there is Herbert and Dorothy Vogel, a postal clerk and his librarian wife who amassed a legendary collection of over 4,700 works of Minimal, Conceptual and Post-minimal art on their meager civil servant salaries. The couple lived among their works like reality TV hoarders, with art stored in boxes, bookcases and portfolios piled on tables, floors and shelves of their tiny New York City apartment. Those with greater resources open private museums; it is a highlight of every December to see works presented from the Rubell, Cisneros, Margulies and de La Cruz collections during Art Basel Miami Beach week. More often, however, contemporary art lives in warehouses or is stored in climate-controlled mausoleums, seeing the light of day only when temporarily loaned to an exhibition. In such cases, artworks exist virtually, in the lore, documentation and intellectual history of an artist’s oeuvre.

Monique Burger had other plans. In 2005, she decided to share her collection with the public, and posted images of the artworks on the web to make it accessible to scholars, curators and critics. But it soon became clear that sharing the collection in the virtual realm was not enough. Exhibiting the artworks became crucial to their mission, so in 2007, Monique went on a European “listening tour” to find out what other collectors were doing. She quickly realized that a private museum would end up being more about the institution than the art, and besides, how would they do it without being tethered to thousands of square feet of bricks and mortar? So, in keeping with their peripatetic lifestyle, the Burgers are taking their collection on the road. In so doing, says Monique, “We hope to generate some new perspectives on both the existing and potential functions of a private collection within the contemporary art system.”

In 2009, the Burger Collection embarked on the multi-regional exhibition and research project called *Quadrilogy* under the leadership

Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.



Kris Martin, *God*, 2008, Metal and mirror, 28 x 14 ¼ x 12 ¼ in. (70.9 x 35.9 x 30.9 cm), Burger Collection, Courtesy Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf, Photographer Achim Kukulies, Düsseldorf.



Titus Kaphar, *Doubt*, 2010, Bronze and oil on canvas, 67 x 45 ¾ x 37 in. (116.3 x 94 cm), Courtesy Friedman Benda Gallery, Bill Orcutt photographer.

of Daniel Kurjaković, an independent curator. “We have largely avoided seeking any advice of art consultants, but we did start working with curator Daniel Kurjaković. Daniel is the head of program and curator for our Quadrilogy project. We are very happy and fortunate to have him at our side. Daniel added his own sensibility as curator to the collection and the exhibitions, and, to my delight, the works that I have known for many years look fresh...” Over the next four to six years, temporary exhibitions based on the aesthetic key ideas of subjectivity, narration, history and language will be held in diverse locations around the world. “The Quadrilogy now enables us to re-examine the art works in the collection,” explains Kurjaković, “and, very importantly, to re-contextualize them in the societal, political and historical circumstances of their emergence and production. It also touches on many wider concerns that most people with a serious interest in the art of today will appreciate: the relationship between art and research, the legacy of post-colonialism, or the function of criticism, to name just a few... There is a lot on the plate and we still have much work ahead of us, but in the future, the Quadrilogy will most likely shape the collection’s profile, down to its acquisition policy.”

Monique adds, “The Quadrilogy manifests itself in different regions, and in so doing, places the works in specific geo-cultural zones; sometimes the works get re-introduced in their original cultural context of production. Research on-site, co-operations with educational institutions, exhibition sites and additional local and international partners deepen the knowledge about the art works in the collection and illuminate some of the trans-cultural dimensions and intricacies of contemporary art.” The first stop on the world tour was Berlin, with the exhibition titled “Conflicting Tales” focusing on subjectivity and consciousness. Next stop, Hong Kong, with a show about narrative, fiction and distorted truths. Kurjaković explains, “Indeed, we have been planning our next project in Hong Kong for some months now. We approach the site in terms of its very specific history in the context of Asia, including not only its colonialist past, the relatively recent transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to the People’s Republic of China and the present discussions about partial autonomy in relation to Mainland China, but heritage and urban concerns. The project will not only involve the presentation of artists from the Burger Collection relating to issues of history, but also will in large part be developed in collaboration with local artists, institutions and academia.”

As the Burger Collection continues to grow, we can expect to see the interconnected network of art, ideas, narratives and cultures forming into a unique and personal snapshot of the art of our times - global, political, challenging and ever-changing.

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Karen Kilimnik, *That way*, 2002, Water soluble oil color on canvas, 5 x 7 in. (12.7 x 17.8 cm), Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York.

