

AMERICA'S MOST VORACIOUS ART COLLECTOR

BY HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA

As a young boy growing up in Minneapolis, Frederick R. Weisman couldn't have suspected that one day he would donate \$1 million to the city for a sculpture garden across from the Walker Art Center. He could, however, have suspected that he would be an art collector. Even then he was collecting, but stamps were the focus of his obsession. Today, he is one of the country's most voracious collectors of contemporary art. He flies around the world in his company Jetstar, which has been painted a midnight blue with stars by California artist Edward Ruscha, while the interior is a pale sky blue with clouds by another prominent California artist, Joe Goode. If there is an art opening in Manhattan, Tokyo, Paris or Helsinki, chances are good that Weisman will be there—with his checkbook.

Weisman, seventy-three, has been seriously collecting art since the fifties, but in 1982 he formed the Frederick Weisman Foundation. Since then, he has acquired over 250 works of art worth many millions of dollars. He'll fly to New York for a weekend and come back with a dozen paintings. In China, his buying spree added fifteen pieces to the collection. His curator, Nora Halpern, calls it "a frightening rate of acquisition."

Weisman asks me to take a seat in a wrought-iron chair designed by the surrealist Giacometti and gestures at the paneled walls of his library, where abstract paintings by Arshile Gorky and Adolph Gottlieb hang next to an altar holding contemporary ceramics by Ken Price and an Andy Warhol portrait of the collector himself.

Explains Weisman, "When someone asks, 'What kind of art do you like?' what can I say? I have Cézanne, I've got Manzu, I have Warhol. The stuff is all over the line.

I've never read any books on art. I've never been an artist. It's just what it means to me personally. I live with art, I work with art, I even fly with art."

His home—a Spanish Mission-style mansion in the hills of Los Angeles, between neighbors Barbra Streisand and Burt Reynolds—is filled with works of American and European art from every decade of this century. There are paintings by modern artists from 1910 to the 1930s—Picasso, Miró, De Chirico, Braque—paintings by Abstract Expressionists of the forties and fifties—Mark Rothko, Hans Hofmann, Barnett Newman—and a hefty compilation of contemporary art from the Pop artists of the sixties, like James Rosenquist, to the latest creations by young artists working in Los Angeles and SoHo. And that's not even mentioning the collection of contemporary Japanese art in the Maryland office of his company, Mid-Atlantic Toyota, one of the largest distributors of this country's best-selling imported car.

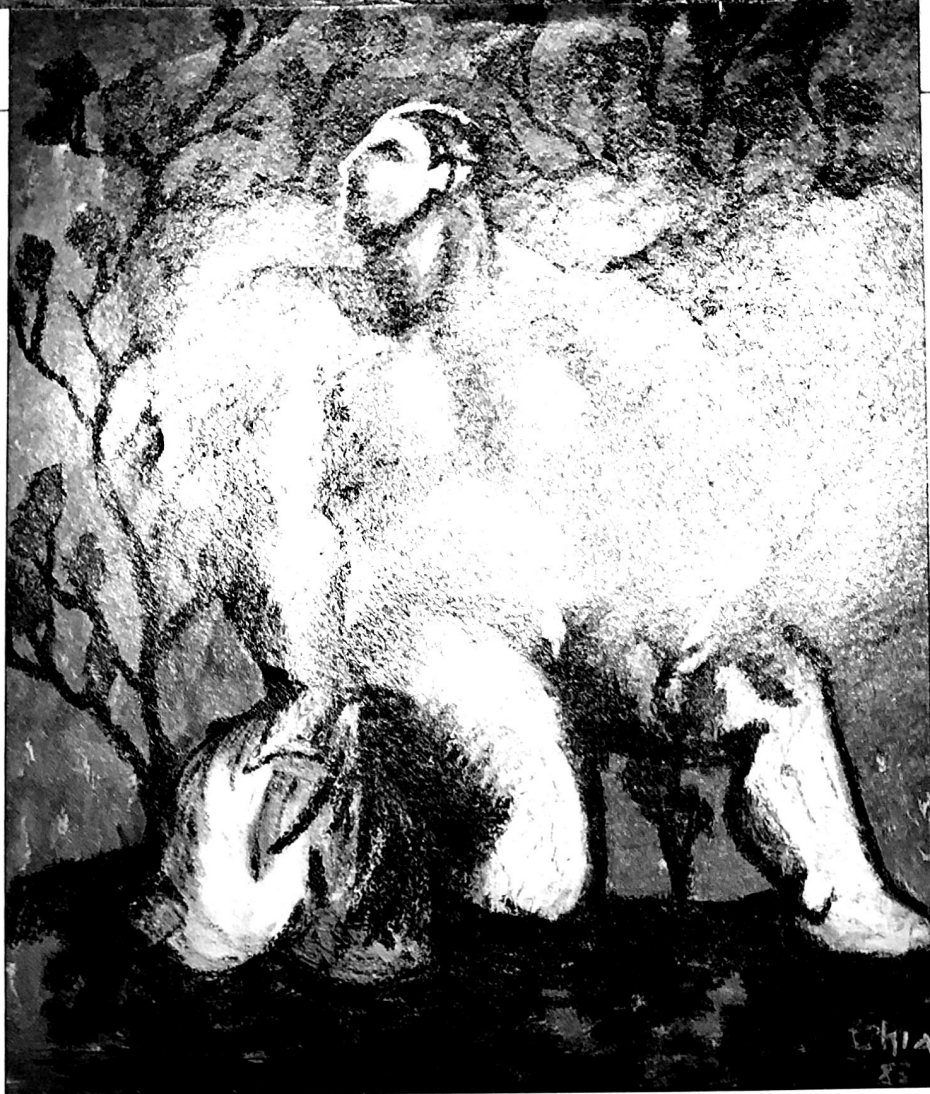
Although Weisman is a trustee of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts and the Japan Society, and he frequently donates works of art or funds to them, he now wants to establish his own museum. He hopes to house the art from his personal, corporate and foundation collections in Los Angeles where he was raised) in the elegant Greystone Mansion, built in 1926 by Edward L. Doheny Jr. in Beverly Hills. Chairman of the Greystone Foundation, Frederick Nicholas, claims "the odds are very good" that Weisman's proposal will be approved by the Beverly Hills City Council. If not, threatens Weisman, "I'll move it to New York." Some of the art is already there, in his Manhattan brownstone.

If something turns me on, I'll buy it, says millionaire mogul Frederick Weisman, and so he jets around the world on a maniacal quest to purchase every important piece of contemporary art in sight. Soon he'll have enough Warhols Picassos, Rothkos and Mirós to establish his own museum.

FREDERICK WEISMAN is so committed to filling the world with visual stimuli that even the offices of his Frank Gebry-designed Mid-Atlantic Toyota dealership resemble an art gallery. He also hangs art in the offices of his affiliated companies and loans artwork to politicians such as Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley and U.S. senators Alan Cranston and Pete Wilson.



Andy Warhol, Frederick Weisman, 1984.



Sandro Chia, *Man on Rock*, 1983:

"When I buy I never think, 'Where am I going to put it?' or 'Is it too big?' I just buy it and find a way. I may have to close off a window or something like that. For example, this Chia was first in the music room and I moved it twice. Every time I saw it, it just hit me between the eyes. That's the reason I closed off that window to the backyard. I thought how great it would be to walk in the front door and see it before anything else."



Willem de Kooning, *Pink Angel*, 1949:

"I bought this de Kooning with Marcia, and it's now worth at least fifty times what we paid for it. In fact, we couldn't make up our minds whether to get this one or Dark Pond, so I said, 'Let's get both.' Marcia has Dark Pond now."

Duane Hanson, *Florida Shopper*, 1973:

"She reminds me of somebody's mother-in-law. There is something tough in that look of hers that says she has a son and nobody is good enough for him. I also have Hanson's polyester sculpture of an old man slumped in a chair, which I call 'the Retired Toyota Dealer.' This is a big house. I'm here alone a lot and I like having people around."



MY FAVORITE ARTWORKS

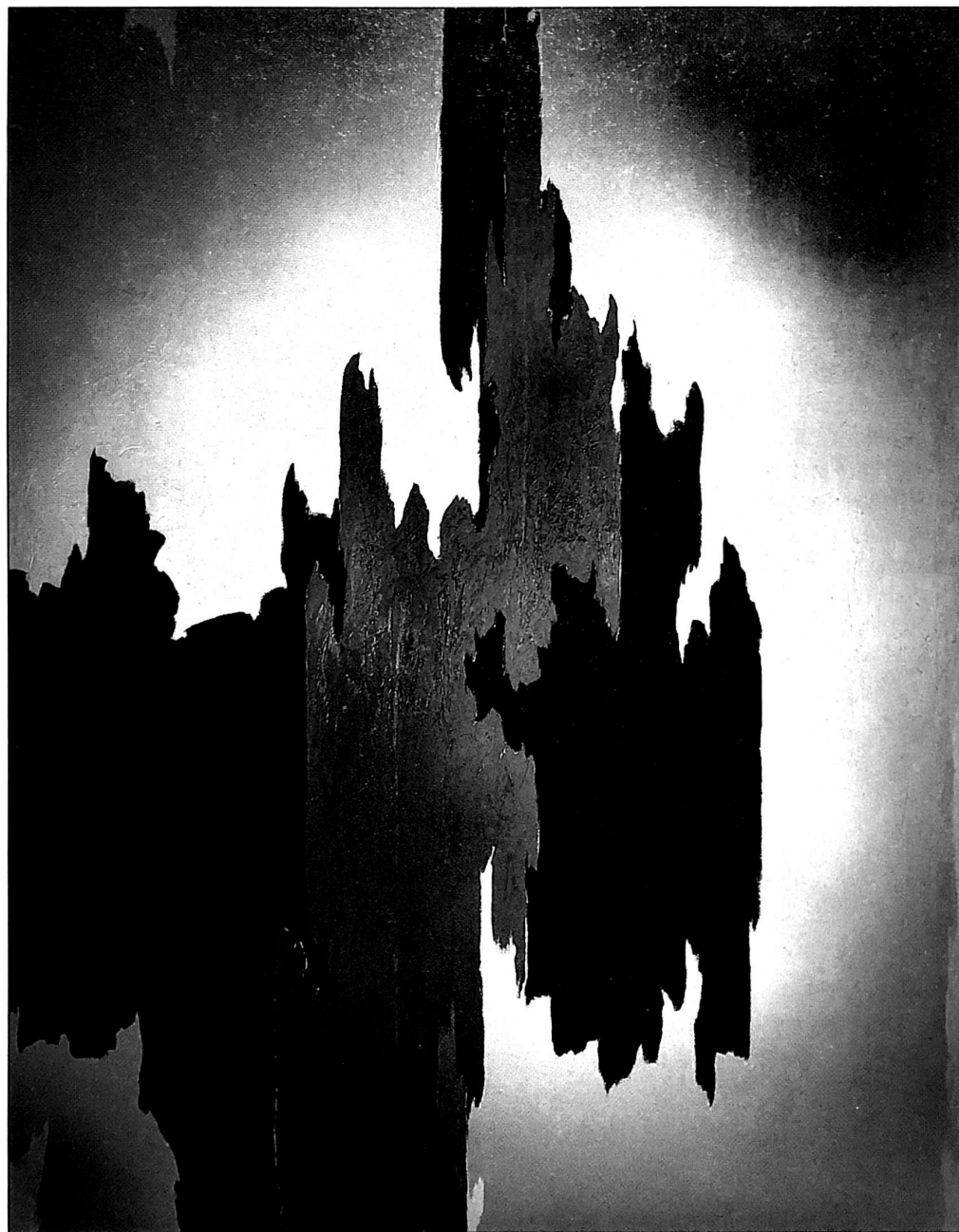
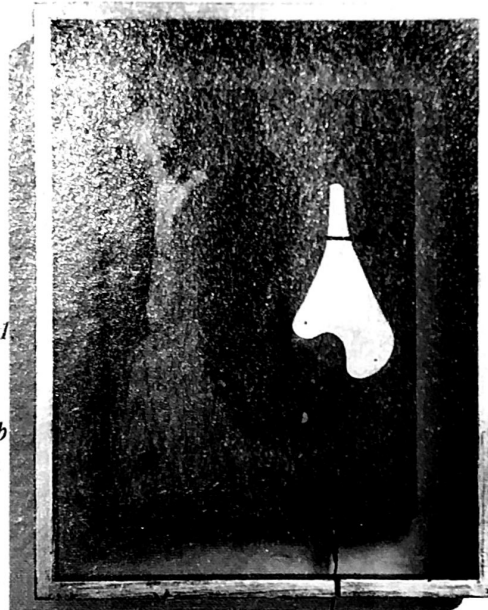
Highlights from the Weisman Gallery

Some people count sheep to get to sleep. Frederick Weisman thinks about how to rehang the art in his mansion. Of the hundreds of paintings, sculptures, drawings and photographs, he says, "I sort of relate it to being like my children. How can you say which ones are favorites? On the other hand, I like to play this game once in a while: If there were a fire and you had to grab one thing, which would it be? I'd have to pick ten or fifteen things."

What follows is a tour of the Weisman Gallery, focusing on a few of the collector's favorites. —H.D.

Joan Miró, *Objet Peinture*, 1931

"If I know a work of art is going to be available, I'll go after it. The Miró with the lamb bone was owned by a family in Chicago. I loved it and when I found out they were going to sell it, I just flipped out and bought it."



Clyfford Still, *Untitled*, 1954:

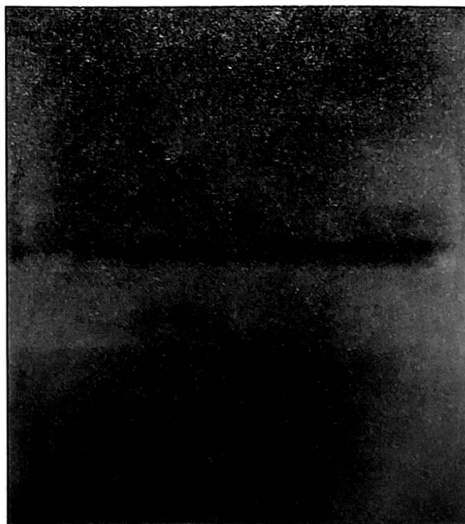
"Somebody must have told you to ask me about that one. It's a crazy story. [My ex-wife] Marcia and I had about seven or eight Stills and loved them. Then I saw a beautiful Sam Francis 'blue ball' that [collector] Ed Janss had and I made a trade. I gave Janss the Still, and he gave me \$50,000 and the Sam Francis painting. Then, in my divorce, Marcia got the Sam Francis. The Still came up for sale at auction last spring and I bought it back. I set a new record, and I'm not looking for those kinds of records—very high six figures, between \$700,000 and \$800,000. I originally bought it for \$70,000. But when I saw it, I didn't think about what I had paid for it, you know? This room is kind of dark and it just lights it up."

MY FAVORITE ARTWORKS



Pablo Picasso, Mother and Child, 1901:

"I bought that from the Marlboro Gallery. I guess that would be one of the things I would grab if there were a fire. I must say it's a combination of really liking it plus being a little practical. That painting was in the seven figures, over a million dollars. How did I pay for it? Well, I try to get the best price, and the best way is to pay cash and then go home and worry about it."



Mark Rothko, #10, 1953:

"[Art dealer] Ben Heller was probably one of the first collectors I had respect for. He really exposed me to the New York school. He had three Rothkos and this is one. I always loved that Rothko, and then when I was at the Aquavella Gallery, in New York, I saw that and bought it. That was in the middle six figures. Marcia has the two Rothkos that we had. I bought one in Paris many years ago, and it's worth at least ten times what we paid."

George Segal, Rush Hour, 1983-84:

"George Segal was in town and asked if I'd seen his show at the Newport Harbor Art Museum. We drove down, I saw this piece and said, 'That's fantastic.' I saved him the freight of taking it back by buying it. Isn't it great? I can just see those people coming out of the subway in New York City and walking into the garden environment of my backyard. I've known George a long time but I've never seen him do a work with bronze before."



There are as many kinds of collectors as there are styles of art. Weisman is free-wheeling, buying first and asking questions later. "If something turns me on, I buy it," he says evenly. Though he seems to have the stamina of a much younger man, he softly reminds, "I don't have many days left." Many believe he is building the collection as a hedge against his mortality. His secretary of fifteen years, Lee Larson, claims she can keep pace only because her boss is out of town every other week. Weisman rises daily at 6:00 a.m. to exercise, and socializes late into the evening. It can also be exhausting for his curator, Halpern—fifty years his junior—who says, "The only frightening thing about a permanent home for the collection is knowing it will never be big enough."

Weisman is obsessed with a game he calls "catch-up," replenishing the collection that was divided when he and his wife, Marcia, divorced in 1982, after forty-five years together. Says Halpern, "He tries to buy works that remind him of works he no longer owns. For example, he bought a [Hans] Hofmann with the same color green as Marcia's. On the other hand, he wants his own identity. I think he does have a newfound freedom. It's his chance to show what he likes."

In the past three years, Weisman has purchased half a dozen paintings by Ed Ruscha. "To sell something to Fred is like selling to a museum," says the artist, "and that's a bright thought for artists because the work is not being speculated on. He is thinking beyond his mere mortal self with this idea of a foundation. Usually, when people get older, they lose interest or get more conservative. You can say he's someone living life to the hilt in the later years. I'd swap him a work of art for some of that elixir."

Weisman buys art for personal gratification but also sees that it benefits the public as well. Until his museum opens, the art from his foundation is on loan. In the past year, parts have been exhibited at museums in Palm Springs, Albuquerque, Salt Lake City, Honolulu, Tucson and Pasadena.

Most recently, the collection opened at the Anchorage Museum of History and Art in Alaska. Says an enthusiastic Weisman, "You couldn't believe how Anchorage related to the collection. They've got a won-

derful museum of Alaska art, but when they saw all this twentieth-century art, they just flipped out. It was the first contemporary art exhibition of its size in the state." Indeed, the front page of the newspaper he holds is emblazoned with an enormous painting by Roy Lichtenstein. Next year, the art will travel through Israel, China, Japan and Europe.

Weisman believes collectors have a responsibility to share their art and provide educational opportunities. "What is art if you can't share it?" he asks. "There are people all over this world who haven't the privilege of being able to get on a bus or take a taxi and see beautiful collections in Paris, New York or London," he explains. "I want to try to spread contemporary art to those particular areas where people haven't had an opportunity to enjoy it."

Weisman insists that everything he buys be on view, so Halpern arranges loans to universities, art schools, hospitals and even politicians' offices. In a resigned voice, she says, "He has stuff on loan to [Los Angeles Mayor] Tom Bradley's office, [U.S. Senators] Alan Cranston's and Pete Wilson's offices. He's manic about filling the world up with visual stimuli. Any time he sees a blank wall, he says, 'Hmmm. What can we put here?' He's as fanatical about it as he is about collecting."

Weisman also likes to support younger, emerging artists by buying their work and exhibiting it along with the works of modern masters. "Having an Ellsworth Kelly on one side and a Jasper Johns on the other, with a young artist in between, is wonderful, I think." It benefits the viewers, too, he believes, by introducing them to that which is most "new."

His commitment to art extended to hiring postmodern architect Frank Gehry to design the Mid-Atlantic Toyota Distributors' building in 1978. With its pastel walls and chain-link room dividers, it provides a sophisticated, gallerylike context for many paintings and drawings by California artists. Weisman's company distributes Toyotas to dealers in Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, Delaware and Washington, D.C. Weisman also hangs art in the offices of his affiliated companies that provide insurance, credit, port operations and "after-market products" such as weatherproofing and accessories to

Toyota dealers. All of this comes under the umbrella title of Frederick Weisman Company, which brings revenues of \$75 million annually. "The thing I'm so proud of is that we've done this in fifteen years," he comments.

Curiously, Weisman had already retired from one corporation when Toyota approached him in 1970. "They gave one-third of the U.S. to three of us," he says. "Timing is so important. Going into that automobile business when the oil shortages and Middle Eastern problems came up, it couldn't have been at a better time."

Timing or luck are recurring topics in Weisman's conversations, perhaps because he's had more than his share of both. His

The Weismans' first major purchase was Jean Arp's Self-Absorbed. We bought it at a Parke Bernet auction for \$6,500, he recalls. That was a lot of money then.'

father, a Russian immigrant, was a successful entrepreneur in furs, hotels and real estate in Minneapolis. His parents separated when he was six, and he came to Los Angeles with his mother. Although he was financially "very comfortable," he started to work when he was young. "I didn't have to do it, but I liked that feeling of earning and being worthwhile. I'll never retire. I just think that working is part of my life. I retired for a few months and went stir crazy. Whatever I'm doing I want to do better. And I love things to grow. That's my whole way of life, my art, everything. I'm a perfectionist. Whatever I do, I'm always thinking how I can do it better."

Weisman went to UCLA to study business, then transferred to a school in Minneapolis so he could work with his father, and transferred a third time to a university in Portland, Oregon. It was 1932. "I didn't even finish college," he recalls wryly. "In my senior year, times were tough. I had a

chance to get a job as a sound mixer at MGM studios and I grabbed it. Now I'm on the board of the graduate school of business at the University of Maryland, but I didn't finish college myself. I think it's so important if a young man can not only finish his four years, but get legal or financial graduate school work. Not that he'll ever end up as an accountant or lawyer, but both things are very important in business."

A few years later, one of Weisman's two brothers—one of whom is a lawyer and one a judge—approached him with a business deal. A man in the produce business needed an investor, and Weisman soon found himself selling oranges to Valvita

Weisman insists that everything he buys be on view, and so he loans his art to museums, universities, art schools, hospitals and offices. 'What is art if you can't share it?' he asks.

Food Products Inc., owned by Myer Simon and his son Norton Simon. In 1938, Weisman met Marcia Simon, Norton's younger sister, and proposed marriage after one month. The Simons hired Weisman and in 1943 merged with Hunt Bros. Packing, which they renamed Hunt Foods. Weisman, then thirty-one, was named president, and in just a few years, the company became the profitable Hunt-Wesson Foods.

"I was fortunate to be involved with a growing business during the Depression," muses Weisman. "It was a real struggle to be alive, and to grow during that time was a great experience. You can't go to school and learn those things.

Norton Simon's inclinations toward perfection influenced Weisman, as did his interest in art. Simon had started collecting art, encouraged by his first wife, Lucille, in the late forties. His collection of old masters and modern art in Pasadena's Norton

Simon Museum of Art is now considered one of the finest private holdings in the world. The Weismans bought a few antiques but weren't "hooked" until one fateful trip to New York in 1957. Simon suggested they have dinner with the eminent art dealer Ben Heller. His apartment was lined with colorful Abstract Expressionist paintings by artists of the New York school: Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Mark Rothko. Weisman remembers, "I went to Heller's with an open mind and what I saw really turned me on. We saw the way Ben was living with art. It was wonderful. I never had a feeling like, 'What is that?' It was something that just moved me. Marcia Weisman now owns their first major purchase, *Self-Absorbed*, by Jean Arp. Remembers Weisman, "We bought it at an auction at Parke Bernet and I went up to \$6,500. My ribs were hurting because Marcia kept hitting me every time I went up. That was a lot of money then. It was crazy. That was the first thing we bought in the four figures."

Marcia Weisman was the original motivating force behind their purchase of an abstract canvas by Clyfford Still in 1959 for \$35,000 and, in 1961, of a blue-and-green Rothko for \$14,000, both of which are now worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. She recalls, "We always bought together. He would put his money where my eye was. But his eye got so good so fast."

In 1958, Weisman's considerable income soared overnight from an investment in a uranium mine—another example of timing and luck. He retired from Hunt-Wesson. "I wanted to be my own person and not be involved with a lot of corporate politics," he confesses. But it didn't work out that way. "My business now is bigger than the one I got out of," he says with an ironic smile. "I made investments in companies where I could participate in management or in a direct way."

Over the next decade, Weisman started a bank, California Financial, the first savings and loan on the New York Stock Exchange, and invested in real estate. He developed shopping centers and tract housing in Orange County, California. He bought race horses and a track in San Francisco. "We had a lot of fun there and made some money to hold our interest." He even invested in Hillside Cemetery, near the L.A. International Airport, where Al

Jolson is buried. Then he was approached by Toyota.

Weisman's son, Richard, continues to manage the investments through his company, Lerand, a name composed of the middle names of father and son. Weisman's two daughters were both victims of Down's syndrome, and so, apart from art, Weisman's largest charitable contributions go to institutions for mental health, such as the Devereux Foundation. He also contributes to Cedar Sinai Medical Center. In addition, he donates money for education, and the Fred Weisman Holding Company sponsors the national program LEAD at the University of Maryland to fund graduate studies in business for black students.

"I think it's a corporate responsibility," says Weisman. "You can be interested in making money, but if you don't accept corporate or individual responsibility for sharing with people, organizations or projects that need it, that's being a taker. I'm a strong believer in sharing things, being helpful."

Today, Weisman's business generally takes care of itself, so he can devote himself to completing his collection. No matter how hectic his schedule, he will manage to visit the Andre Emmerich or Sidney Janis Gallery in New York, or the Margo Leavin Gallery in Los Angeles. "When buying a work, I get a feeling in the pit of my stomach. I'll walk away and not make a decision that day, but it's in my mind all the time until I go back. If I see it a second time and have the same feeling, I buy it. If it doesn't stand up as much, I won't."

Novice collectors often come to Weisman for advice, knowing that much of what he and his wife first bought increased dramatically in value. "I always say, 'Don't buy art as an investment.' Somebody who wants to be a collector has to enjoy it as I do. You buy because of how you feel, not because it's a good buy. I can spend a couple of thousand dollars on an artist and if it doesn't wear well, I'll give it away or sell it, or if there is no market for it, well, big deal. It is as if I went to Europe for a vacation. Spending a couple of hundred thousand dollars, it has to be something I really like." Weisman pauses sagely for effect: "I don't think any collector should be spending that kind of money on art unless he really knows what he's doing." ♦