

Rosette in Bloom

BY HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP | JULY 07, 2009



It is hard to imagine anyone recovering from a broken heart with greater élan than [Rosette Delug](#). Her meteoric rise as one of Los Angeles's most energetic contemporary-art collectors began in the winter of 2001, when she flew from her Beverly Hills home to New York to tell her youngest son, who was attending Columbia University, that she and her husband were getting divorced. [Sam Delug](#), an Australian-born attorney who made a fortune in the international long-distance telephone business, had decamped after 25 years of marriage. His midlife crisis precipitated hers, but thanks to that fateful visit, she bounced back with vigor.

Her friend and attorney [Dennis Roach](#), an avid contemporary-art collector, happened to be in Manhattan that February to attend the **Armory Show** and invited her to join him. She had never bought art before, but that evening she experienced *acoup de foudre* and walked away

with a drawing by **Neo Rauch**, a small painting by [Luc Tuymans](#) and four drawings of women's torsos in black lingerie by [Marlene Dumas](#). Not a bad eye for a beginner.

Delug took at once to the challenge of developing her taste — and, perhaps just as important, to that of pushing a deal to completion. She recalls that initially [Frank Demaegd](#), of the Antwerp gallery **Zeno X**, did not want to sell her the Dumas works. "But I begged, and by the end of the evening, I had the drawings," she says, adding that she carried them home in her suitcase.

The stylish Delug — tall, slender and often clad in Chanel, with an Hermès bag on her arm — was baffled that seasoned gallerists would not immediately sell her what she wanted to buy. "Nobody had ever said no to me before," the 58-year-old admits in her slightly Turkish-accented English. "That was a shock." Eventually, her enthusiasm and commitment convinced dealers to start saying yes.

With those first modest purchases, she was on her way to building a remarkable collection. In just eight years, she acquired some 400 pieces, most of them produced in this decade. Her early bias was for new works by younger artists like [Mark Grotjahn](#), [Sterling Ruby](#) and [Anna Sew Hoy](#), along with canvases by such highly prized painters as [Cecily Brown](#), [John Currin](#) and [Chris Ofili](#).

By 2003, Delug had become a competitive player who savored the thrill of the chase. That year, along with Roach, she snuck into **Art Basel** disguised as an installer, in overalls and with a fake badge. "Before [the fair] opened," she says, "I saw every piece of art and was able to buy what I wanted,"

including paintings and drawings by [Matt Greene](#), [Richard Phillips](#), [Chris Vasell](#) and [Lisa Yuskavage](#).

Delug is accustomed to rewriting the rules. In 1972, while she was still in her teens and enrolled in a strict all-girls school in Turkey, her well-to-do Jewish parents chose a husband for her, in accordance with Turkish custom. After exchanging vows with the groom, Delug told her mother and father she would run away rather than stay married.

"It was a big scandal," she says. "A woman wasn't allowed to get a passport without her husband's permission." Using an old passport bearing her maiden name, she left Turkey, telling no one but her family.

A divorce was quietly arranged, and she traveled to Los Angeles, where she stayed with family friends while attending UCLA. After graduating, three years later, she returned to Turkey, only to have her parents select another groom for her. She fled back to L.A. and, within a few weeks, met attorney [Samuel Delug](#). They were married in 1977 and had three children together.

Delug's rebellious past may explain her empathy with daring young artists. It is an inclination she shares with [Paul Schimmel](#), the chief curator of the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#) (MOCA) in Los Angeles, who is known for organizing such controversial exhibitions as the recent [Takashi Murakami](#) retrospective. Roach introduced Delug to Schimmel, who in 2003 — after she had already purchased an enormous [Mark Manders](#) sculpture for the museum — asked her to join MOCA's acquisitions committee. "We started going to galleries," she says. "Can you imagine his insights and the education I got? And Paul knows everybody."

Delug became one of MOCA's trustees in 2004. But when the board, despite what she considered the dismaying restrictions attached, accepted collector [Eli Broad](#)'s offer last winter of \$15 million in matching funds to help the institution out of its financial distress, she tendered her resignation, along with [Jennifer Simchowitz](#) and [Ruth Bloom](#). "There are many ways I can support MOCA without having the word trustee next to my name," says Delug. This past May, for example, she and Simchowitz cochaired MOCA's biannual auction, which raised \$650,000 for the museum.

MOCA does not claim her undivided attention, however. In 2004, Delug also joined the [Hammer Museum](#)'s board, motivated in part by her friendship with Hammer director [Ann Philbin](#), and has earned kudos there for her willingness to underwrite exhibitions and acquisitions at a time when many are cutting back. "I am equally involved with both institutions," Delug says. "You can have more than one child and love them both." That affection extends to the curators and directors, of whom she says, "These people became my friends and teachers."

Indeed it was Schimmel who encouraged one of her most significant purchases: a spectacular [Bruce Nauman](#) drawing of the words "Death Life Love Pleasure Pain" arranged in a multicolored circle. He spotted it three years ago at the **Art Basel Miami Beach** booth of the New York dealer [Christophe Van de Weghe](#). "I said, 'Rosette, you've got to look at this,'" Schimmel recalls, adding that at \$650,000, it was "a price point she had never jumped to. [But] she understood that when it was in her house, it would make her a better collector." For Delug, the acquisition represented a willingness to embrace Conceptual work. "To spend that kind of money on a few words on a piece of paper," she says, "it really had to be art."

The Nauman holds pride of place in the collection that Delug has displayed throughout the midcentury house she bought three years ago. Situated atop the hills of the exclusive **Trousdale Estates**, it encompasses 8,000 square feet of mostly open space, with vast windows revealing what realtors call "jetliner" views of Los Angeles. On a recent afternoon, wearing a black T-shirt and pants, with dozens of thin gold bracelets encircling her bare forearm, Delug is moving some pieces around the house. Leaning against a wall is a digital collage by the duo **Simmons & Burke** that she bought last fall from their first show at L.A.'s [Kim Light/Lightbox](#) gallery and needs to make space for.

"The first few years, Rosette accumulated," says [Gordon VeneKlasen](#), director of the **Michael Werner** gallery in New York. "Now she is concentrating on what she really likes." Delug has begun to pursue more European artists. She bought a [Sigmar Polke](#) self-portrait photograph at a fair a few years ago, and since then VeneKlasen has sold her two other works by the artist: an amber painting and a mixed-media piece featuring enlarged newspaper photos of a nude man and woman. Delug explains that her interest in Polke and other more-established artists has come from talking with younger artists she admires and collects: "I heard about who they respected, and I started looking into them. It's a normal graduation."

In displaying her collection, Delug has created a rambunctious dialogue between established artists and newcomers. Hanging on a living-room wall is a riff on traditional British portraiture by [Richard Wathen](#) that she purchased from [Max Wigram](#), in London, while a **Jim Lambie** sculpture made of colored folded doors tumbles across the floor. In the foyer an expansive abstract work by the up-and-coming painter [Tomory Dodge](#) faces simple graphic works by such major names as [James Lee Byars](#) and [Lee Bontecou](#). A delicate chain sculpture

by [Liz Larner](#) is draped over a chest near a sitting room. The great room contains chairs by [Roy McMakin](#), whose giant furniture she first encountered at the L.A. home of [John Baldessari](#), another artist she collects.

When she moved into her house, Delug worked with the local designer [Sarah Walker](#) to create interiors that highlight the art. The sculptor [Franz West](#) created her long, slim dining table together with the chairs with woven seats that surround it, while above the bar hangs a video screen playing a cheery animation of city and country scenes by **Chiho Aoshima**. The integration of art and environment is most evident, though, in the placement of [Lawrence Weiner](#)'s text piece *Stretched as Tightly as Is Possible: (Satin) & (Petroleum Jelly)*. When she began remodeling, Delug asked the artist where he would like it situated. His reply: at the bottom of the swimming pool. Without hesitation, she had the pool emptied and the work, unique in the artist's oeuvre, installed. When Weiner's retrospective opened at MOCA, Delug hosted the party.

Her soirees have contributed to her popularity in the art world. They are legendary for bordering on the outrageous: At one of the dozens of museum events she has hosted, Playboy bunnies appeared "wearing" spray-painted bikinis. Delug enjoys shocking or titillating her jaded art world guests. "This is part of my creative process," she says. "It's like a happening instead of the same old party."

But Schimmel cautions against reducing Delug to her social role. "First you think she's a party girl who likes the scene," he says. "But then you realize she is supersmart and absolutely focused." Although Delug takes tips from him, Philbin and others, she makes her own decisions. She has no interest in competing with those vying to accumulate pieces by the best-known, and

costliest, artists of the past 50 years. "I'm not a covetous person," she says. "These are not trophies. Each and every piece I bought because I want to look at it."

"Rosette in Bloom" originally appeared in the July/August 2009 issue of Art+Auction. For a complete list of articles from this issue available on ARTINFO, see Art+Auction's [July/August 2009 Table of Contents](#).