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A passion for fine art

Hollywood executives make money in Celluloid and spend it on canvas

By Hunter Drohojowaka

Billy Wilder, director and art collector, once wryly observed that "Hollywood at its most successful is affluent. Once you have the two pools and the house in Palm Springs, you might just be bored. So you buy two or three name paintings, hang them on your wall, and you're a Hollywood collector."

Hollywood's acquisition complex has spawned art collections ranging in quality from the hideous to the heavenly. Wilder, himself, Edward G. Robinson, William and Edie Goetz, Vincent Price, Ray Stark, Andy Williams and Michael Creighton are a few of the collectors who have exhibited discipline and discernment in gathering art from Impressionism through Popism. More recently, producers Norman Lear, Dan Melnick, Bud Yorkin and actor Steve Martin have been acquiring the work of contemporary artists, especially those who work in Los Angeles. In fact, there has been such a groundswell of interest that it is rumored a contemporary art support group, exclusively made up of figures from the film, TV and record industries and acting separately from the existing Modern and Contemporary Art Council, may be established at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

All of this interest could be good news to the growing contemporary art community of this city. The surprising and sobering news is that some of the most active collectors in the industry today are focusing their attention and resources on the artists from New York. Not only do they buy the blue chip contemporary classics such as

Ellsworth Kelly, Frank Stella and Richard Serra, but they also buy work by the hot young artists dominating the pages of the New York art magazines. Julian Schnabel (who, at 31, saw one of his paintings sold at auction last month for \$93,000), David Salle, Bryan Hunt, Susan Rothenberg, Joel Schapiro, Elizabeth Murray, Donald Sultan, Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo, Jean-Michel Basquiat — these artists, most of whom are in their early 30s, have a waiting list for their work. The paintings sell for between \$10,000 and \$60,000. No comparable situation exists for artists from L.A.

Among the most prominent and

visible collectors of the new New York art are: Douglas Cramer, co-executive producer of the TV series "Love Boat," "Dynasty" and "Matt Huston," and executive vice president of Aaron Spelling productions; Barry Lowen, senior vice president of 20th Century-Fox television; Alan Shayne, president of Warner Brothers television programming; and Scott Spiegel, executive producer of motion pictures for television at ABC.

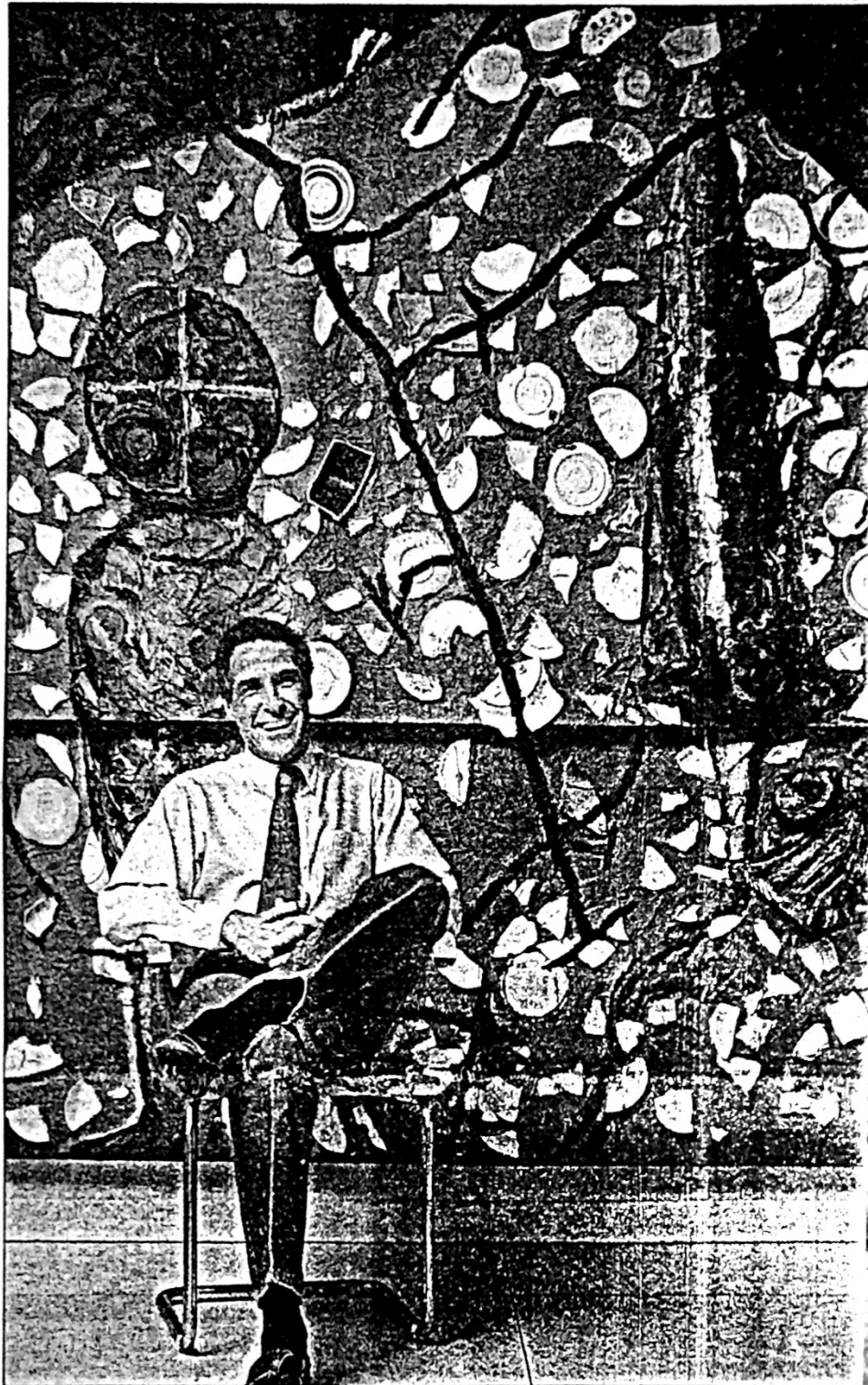
In front of the pillared portico of Cramer's Bel-Air mansion stands an iron sculpture in the shape of a crushed cigarette butt by Claus Oldenberg. This odd juxtaposition sets the tone for the accumulation of artwork which crowds the walls of the home. In the hallway hangs Schnabel's double portrait of Cramer and his son, right next to a painting by Salle and a drawing by Serra. A Schapiro figurative sculp-



Warner's Alan Shayne says, "The problem of collecting now is it's become so competitive."

ture appears to dance next to the grand piano in the living room.

Cramer, 51, is on what he terms his third collection. He explains, "I started collecting art as a young man in advertising in New York, collecting the graphics of Lautrec and Giacometti. I sold it all when I moved to California." He began his second collection in 1966, primarily buying California art from the dealer Felix Landau. "In 1976, I got a horrendous Hollywood divorce (from columnist Joyce Haber) and the work was sold by court order at a Sotheby's auction. It was the best thing that ever happened to me. I got rid of all that nonsense and started over. It took me two years to



Many collectors seek out Fox's Barry Lowen for advice. Collecting art, he says, "is like drugs. It's hard to give up."

regroup and have money again. I was dead broke."

Cramer has regrouped with a vengeance. In six years, he's amassed millions of dollars worth of art, enough to overflow the Bel-Air residence and decorate his houses at Trancas Beach and Palm Springs. Now he's building a 25,000 square-foot house in the Santa Ynez Valley to accommodate the art in storage.

Art, he claims, is the passion of his life. "I love the excitement and mystery of a great picture. Short of being the creator, the next best thing is owning it. I'm a person who has always coveted things. Art is something that one can covet and have."

Cramer insists he doesn't buy just for investment, but adds, "When you have this kind of commitment to art, you have to recognize the value of it. It's like backing a horse. Artists often veer off in directions that aren't the best for them. I keep culling, trading, moving on to more important pieces by people I care most about." In the process, he jettisoned Californians with the exceptions of the "masters," such as San Francisco's Richard Diebenkorn and Robert Graham.

One might wonder what inspired Cramer's decision to cleave towards the East Coast aesthetic. One influence came from fellow collector Barry Lowen. Cramer enthuses,

"Barry, to me, is the guru of contemporary collectors. The first person who, as a collector in this town, is 10 years ahead of everyone else in terms of guts and vision. For me, after seeing a piece at Barry's where I had first laughed at Sultan, now I own nine of them and was pushing and fighting like a madman to get another at the last show. Barry is relentless."

Such accolades are not uncommon when Lowen's name is mentioned in the L.A. art world, though the man is unassuming, even diffident as he talks about the great obsession of his life. "I made my

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Hollywood's new art collectors

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entry into the art world about 12 years ago," says Lowen. "At first I didn't relate to or understand minimal or abstract expressionist art. The only painting I liked was Wyeth's 'Christina's World,' which, as you can see, has nothing to do with what I like today."

Compared to the opulence of Cramer, Lowen's environment is almost austere. He lives in a single-story, two bedroom house in Beverly Hills, sparsely furnished so that full focus is on the art. The kitchen/dining area features a white oval table, chairs and a quarter-million dollars worth of art: a 1,200 pound corten steel slab by Serra, a blue and yellow geometric Kelly, one of Stella's exotic bird paintings, a Hunt airship and an early Schnabel. Lowen's living room affords a view through one window was walled over to make room for a new aluminum Stella.

Lowen, who is in his mid-40s, confesses, "I fell in love with art collecting and from that point on, it's like any collecting. It's a form of disease in quotes. It's like drugs, it's hard to give up. Collectors need another fix, that next purchase."

Like Cramer, Lowen started with California art. "That's what I was exposed to. I also collected photo-realism. Over a period of time, the collection shifted and I had to make a decision. Since I couldn't afford to collect everything, I tried to put together a more comprehensive collection focused on a certain area." Lowen initially concentrated on minimal abstraction of the 1970s. He points out that the representational art he now collects is abstract and intellectual.

Because of his knowledge and connections, Lowen is sought out by other collectors for advice and his affinities turn out to be contagious. He has little regard for the efforts of L.A. artists.

"I'm one of the people everyone will get angry at because I'm not a member of the L.A. chamber of contemporary art commerce," admits Lowen. "I don't think L.A. will ever be the major center for art in this country. The primary reason is the old cliché, the nature of the environment and lifestyle isn't conducive to it. The N.Y. art scene shuts down in the summer because everyone is doing what we do all year long. They go to the beach."

Alan Shayne owns works by most of the name artists collected by



Douglas Cramer, above, says, "Short of being the creator, the next best thing is owning it." ABC's Scott Spiegel, left, says, "Today, there is nothing particularly unique about California that distinguishes it from other areas in terms of fine art."

Cramer and Lowen, and he wonders about the surge of competition among the high level collectors. "It's the same in the film business," he observes. "You want a Redford or a DeNiro, a star. So you want a Kelly, or a Stella. The stars in art are made by the critics, the publicity. The same as the industry. The problem of collecting now generally is it's become so competitive. Before, it was about getting a Mercedes, getting Guccis, now it's about getting art. I think a lot of collectors do it because they're acquisitive; it's a status symbol. Until you have a Stella and a Kelly, you haven't made it in a sense."

Although Shayne supports a few young Californians, such as Alexis

Smith, Jay Phillips, John Sonsini and Roger Herman, he frankly acknowledges the economic reasons many people buy from N.Y. There is the underlying doubt that the Californians will escalate in value.

Scott Spiegel, executive producer of motion pictures for television at ABC is one of Hollywood's young collectors. At 30, he has been collecting for 13 years, encouraged by collector parents. His first collection of Pop and abstract art is still in storage back in New York. The walls of his West Hollywood apartment are hung with works by Salle, Schnabel, Brauntuch, Basquiat, Sherman and many works by Robert Longo.

Spiegel is collecting the art of his peers, artists his own age who are often his friends. He says, "I'm interested in the ideas, symbols and notions of contemporary society that I share with artists. In the movies, I deal with themes of social alienation, love, sexuality, hostility, confrontation, institutions and family. My professional life and that of the artists I collect is involved with story-telling."

Spiegel became interested in collecting as a freshman at Georgetown University. "The first time I got off on contemporary art, I went to an apartment in Philadelphia and saw a spectacular collection that included works by Warhol, Lichtenstein, Johns and a lot of the kinetic

'California art is too cute'

By Hunter Drohojowska

Of the Hollywood collectors, one was observed, "As producers it's impossible to get these guys on the phone. A star, an agent, a writer, may have to call back but the art dealer can get right through."

Often a Hollywood collector will buy New York art from the East Coast galleries. When they do buy here they patronize four galleries in a four-block radius of West Hollywood: Margo Leavin, Asher/Faure, Daniel Weinberg and, primarily, Larry Gagosian. Gagosian represents Kelly, Stella, Serra, Salle, Longo, Basquiat, Brauntuch, Sherman and Fischl.



Larry Gagosian

Gagosian, 37, was an English major at UCLA who later worked at the William Morris agency. He started dealing when he started buying art. His first purchase was a sculpture of Joseph Beuys in 1976. Standing in his spacious gallery on Robertson Boulevard, Gagosian explains, "It's not a policy of the gallery not to show to California artists. I honestly think, for me, the most interesting art right now is being made in New York."

"There are two problems I see with California art," he says. "Very often I find it too cute, and almost bordering on the apologetic. I like some of the stuff that came out of

the '60s, but I feel removed from it more than I feel removed from Serra and Judd. They've remained more relevant than their counterparts in L.A. In terms of younger artists in L.A., they're painting watered down versions of New York art or trans-avant garde German and Italian art.

The work originates in New York and gets filtered here. Here, artists are at a disadvantage. Either they are content to be regional, doing the narrative and the funk, which I hate, or they are artists who seem to paint with a brush in one hand and a copy of Artforum in the other."

When Gagosian started selling work

to the Hollywood collectors such as Doug Cramer, Barry Lowen, and Alan Shayne, they were still represented by examples of California art. Gagosian claims they started to find the art being produced in New York more exciting. Then there is the investment factor.

Says Gagosian, "Most of the work I've sold these collectors has gone up in value over five years. They came to realize that their California collections were languishing. California prices don't hold up — with the exception of Hockney, Francis and Diebenkorn, whom I don't even consider L.A. artists."

artists from Europe." Soon after, he bought a study for one of Warhol's early flower paintings, which he still owns.

Spiegel claims he is a California transplant due to his profession rather than choice. In defense of his all N.Y. collection, he points out the exception in local artist Mike Kelly. "I collect art from artists who transcend geographical notion. I don't think of Kelly as a California artist; I think he is an international artist. When I think of California artists, I think of a regional notion of values and cultural symbolism, rather than a geographical location. Every area of the U.S. has regional art. There's a sort of chauvinism

about local art. California art came into popularity with respect to the 1960s, when California lifestyle became a national phenomenon. Today, there is nothing particularly unique about California that distinguishes it from other cities in terms of fine art." He shakes his head at the situation. "New York is the international marketplace of ideas when it comes to art," says Spiegel.

He concludes, "If young painters here moved to the international marketplace of ideas, they could confront issues in painting in an original way. If only they were exposed to the work as opposed to reading about it and seeing it in reproductions in magazines."