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UWM peeks at private art collections

“Sneak Peek: A Look at Private Collections” focuses on private art collections and the people who take artwork into their homes.

By Kat Minerath Feb 14, 2017



Installation view of works from the collection of Debra Brehmer.

An artwork's path in life can take interesting turns. It starts, naturally enough, as an artist's idea or emotion, eventually finding a physical state as a finished piece. After that, the artwork may embark on some interesting journeys as it makes its home elsewhere. *Sneak Peek: A Look at Private Collections* is in part about this journey, but also about the people who take artwork into their homes.

The show is housed in the UWM Union Art Gallery, a spacious location on the campus level of the student union. Outside the gallery, students mill about, engaging in the busy activities of campus life. Inside is a peaceful hush as 10 individual collectors and

couples show selected works from their private homes. Presented as discreet vignettes, each grouping is as unique as the people who have chosen to live with these works.

Many of the collectors are artists, like the painter Jan Serr. Along with her husband, John Shannon, they are avid supporters of the local creative scene. Jan Serr's striking portrait, *Self in Turban*, is a figure in a pink work shirt with a multicolored scarf over her hair. The painting branches out from realism into sharp distinctions of light, color and contrast. It is displayed along with other works, including a Renaissance-inspired piece by noted artist JoAnna Poehlmann and "Self-Portrait with Studio Camera" by esteemed photographer Edward Steichen. The art from their collection is placed against a wall covered in red, prefaced on the floor by a rug and chairs. It creates the atmosphere of a domestic space and the selections, as noted by the collectors' wall text, reflect their shared interest in portraiture.

The perspective of the collectors adds a unique angle to the exhibition, as they explain what draws them to the works they own and live with. Some pieces were found in galleries and art fairs, while others were admired and acquired by way of exchange, as described by artist Keith Nelson. He has also been prominent as a curator and a supporter in the art community. Works from his collection shown include inventive posters from rock shows like Vince Zanger's screenprint for Hawkwind at Cactus Club, as well as art by Harvey Oppgenorth, Michelle Grabner and an especially luminous piece by Shane Walsh. Walsh's untitled painting depicts something like a dark wreck at the bottom of a blue lake. Crushed boards and broken planks lie on a watery floor — and it's Walsh's handling of the painted texture that creates such an uncanny and convincing sensation of murky turquoise depths.

Josie Osborne and Kim Cosier's pieces are also by many local and regional artists and those shown project a sense of slightly dreamy or surreal works. They explain, "Our collection is not something that we have amassed by careful design, but more like a collection of friends gathered over a lifetime." This is one of the golden points to note in this exhibition. For all of these collectors, the acquisition of art is not something to do with investment or status, but instead is about a very real love of living with art and the joy of surrounding oneself with visual pleasures. Osborne recounts the story of one

of the first pieces she purchased from a gallery, somewhere upward of 25 years ago. That print, “A Met Peace” by John Ford, is part of this exhibition. It is a reminder of the longevity of art and its presence in one’s life.

The intersection of personal history and art is exemplified by the installation of hot pads from the collection of Debra Brehmer. Placed in a radiating circle, the dozens of pieces are functional but reframed for their aesthetic properties, as well as symbolic value. Brehmer describes how, when traveling in Rome about 15 years ago, she purchased a doily, which she describes as “a fragile thing made of yellow thread.” For all its fragility, it was a powerful symbol of the crafts and work of women, often overlooked or undervalued. The pieces that she subsequently

collected are textiles as well as ceramic pieces of varied shapes and sizes. Looking over the array of hot pads and trivets, the predilection for decoration and pattern is apparent. These may be utilitarian, but that doesn’t mean they can’t be interesting or beautiful. This impulse reaches down to the foundations of art and its connection to human culture.

A notable figure who is represented in this exhibition by her work as well as her collection is Della Wells. Her art is included in a number of collections, including that of Portia Cobb. Collectively, the pieces that Cobb has chosen often reflect images of home life and the African-American community. Wells’ “Girl Friend Night” is one such piece, a collage where a group of women gather to socialize around a table. With the array of materials Wells chooses, like a large button that becomes a brooch for one woman, or the image of a zipper decorating the clothing of another, the world is described through various small pieces to create a meaningful whole.

So, why does a person collect art?

Della Wells sums up the perspective of most: “There is a simple reason that I collect art — I like it!” If you are curious about art or collecting, the place to start is by looking. Visit museums and galleries, tune into your personal tastes and feelings, engage with artists, ask questions — but above all, enjoy.

On exhibit

Sneak Peek: A Look at Private Collections continues through Feb. 17 in the UWM Union Art Gallery, 2200 E. Kenwood Blvd., UWM Campus Level, W199. A Collector's Panel discussion is at 6:00 p.m. Feb. 10.

Openings and exhibitions

Ornate/Activate

Villa Terrace Decorative Arts Museum

2220 N. Terrace Ave., Milwaukee

6–8 p.m. opening reception: Feb. 16

Exhibition continues through May 14

This exhibition draws from works created by the South Asian Women's Creative Collective and is curated by Alexander Campos. The artists come together in their works, which address social and cultural issues, transformed and transcribed through multiple artistic forms and practices, such as references to architecture, script and decoration.

Fabric of Survival: The Art of Esther Nisenthal Krinitz

Jewish Museum Milwaukee

1360 N. Prospect Ave.

7–9:30 p.m. opening reception

\$10 members, \$15 non-members

RSVP requested by Feb. 10.

Exhibition continues through May 26

Esther Nisenthal Krinitz was 15 when she fled the Nazis in Poland, finding her way to a village where she adopted the identity of an ordinary farm girl. She never saw her family again, but commemorates their memory and her experience in 36 works of

fabric collage. Her daughter, Bernice Steinhardt, will offer a presentation about her mother's work at 7:30 p.m. at the exhibition's opening reception.

The Nut Factory and Toy Factory Open House

3720 N. Fratney St. (The Nut Factory) and 3707 Richards St. (The Toy Factory)

6-11 p.m. open house: Feb. 18

More than two dozen artists and collectives will take part in this annual open house, showcasing artists and their Riverwest studios that are part of the creative community. Painting, sculpture, photography, printmaking and more will be part of this eclectic event.