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A Personal Gallery of Social Justice



Charlotte Wagner with an Alice Neel painting, “Carmen (Man With Guitar),” at her home in Cambridge, Mass.

By Ted Loos

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — In less than 10 years, Charlotte Wagner has turned herself into an art collector to be reckoned with.

Having the means certainly helps (her husband, Herbert S. Wagner III, is a financier) but what Ms. Wagner has in abundance is focus.

“We collect artists who are socially concerned,” said Ms. Wagner, 50, who is a trustee at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, and is chairwoman of its education committee. “They’re from diverse backgrounds and raise our consciousness about issues confronting society,” she said.

The social justice theme is also the driving force behind the Wagner Foundation, which she runs. She and her husband established the foundation, based in Boston, to further social justice goals in areas from education to health to community development.

However high-minded the contents, the genesis of the collection was practical. In 2009, Ms. Wagner found she had to fill up a new home, and began to buy art, largely from galleries.

Several dozen of those pieces currently hang on the walls. Most fit the socially concerned theme, like Yinka Shonibare's "Planets in My Head, Philosophy" (2011), which Ms. Wagner said dealt with "the legacy of colonialism in Africa." Other artists represented include William Kentridge, Cecily Brown, Cornelia Parker, Mark Bradford, Doris Salcedo, Alice Neel and Jean Dubuffet.

Ms. Wagner, who once worked in marketing for Fidelity and Goldman Sachs, does her homework, and she does it in a library with a large Cindy Sherman photograph looking down at her.

"I'm somebody who researches artists' intent. I want to understand what they are trying to accomplish with their work and the messages," she said. "But the hook is always the visual."

On a recent afternoon she talked about her collecting, starting with a striking work in her entrance hall, "Dzodze" (2006), by the Ghanaian-born, Nigeria-based sculptor El Anatsui, known for his assemblages of castoff materials like bottle caps. The conversation has been edited and condensed.

The El Anatsui is really a dramatic way to enter the house.



"Dzodze" was made from found and discarded objects by El Anatsui, a Ghanaian-born sculptor who works in Nigeria.
Credit Tony Luong for The New York Times

It shimmers. It's a beautiful piece, and it sets a magical tone.

What do you know about his process?

He would see all this trash in his neighborhood and on his walks. He started picking it up, collecting it and bringing it back to his studio. He decided that he needed to make some positive use of that material.

Does that practical part appeal to you?

He's taken something very negative, and through his genius, he has created work that is so reverential to the people, the community and the culture of Africa. And you can be awe-struck by its physical beauty. It's very layered. There are lots of stories that can be told through the work.

What else here fits the theme to a T?

Glenn Ligon's "White #2" (1993) [a densely layered graphic text painting in black-and-white]. The work has optical power, as well as a profound message and meaning. The words, all by African-American authors, get a physicality to them. It's about how we talk about race and perceive race in this country. I respect Glenn because he's an amazing curator, too. He is certainly a hero.



Glenn Ligon's "White #2" is made up of words "all by African-American authors," Ms. Wagner explained. "It's about how we talk about race and perceive race in this country," she said. Credit Tony Luong for The New York Times

I see Alice Neel has pride of place over the fireplace with “Carmen (Man With Guitar).”

She mostly painted portraits, of people from all walks of life who interested her. She invested the time to truly see her subjects and to reflect their humanness in her work. Her work reminds me to always live my values, as she lived hers.

In addition to social justice, what else guides your collecting?

When I started I had a young family — I have three kids. I wanted art on the walls that my family could enjoy, that they could understand and grow with, that had a complex narrative, that represented lots of different voices, featuring artists from all over the world.

Do the children have a favorite work?

The El Anatsui. It’s so majestic, it’s hard not to love it. And they went with me to the Brooklyn Museum [to see his work at the show there](#) [in 2013]. So I think that furthers your love of a piece when you get to see it in a different context.

What would you hang if it weren’t a family setting?

I would probably would [choose something by Sarah Lucas](#) [the British artist known for frankly sexual work]. I really respect her — just her commitment to femininity, and her strong commitment to her ideas. I’m not sure my husband would love it as much [laughs].

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