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At the Whitney, Thea and Ethan Wagner Show the Fruits of Prescient Collecting



Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner flanked by artworks that they are donating to the Whitney Museum and that will be featured in a show opening on Friday. At right is Alex Israel's "Self-Portrait," from 2013; at left, "Talent" by David Robbins, from 1986. Credit...Hilary Swift for The New York Times

By Robin Pogrebin

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Thea Westreich Wagner can remember every time she has walked into a gallery with her husband, Ethan Wagner, and thought to herself, "This is the last piece by this artist we're going to be able to afford."

"At a certain point you say, that's the end of that ride," she said.

That is because many of the artists whose work the couple have collected over a quarter-century — including Christopher Wool, Jeff Koons and Richard Prince — have seen their prices soar into the stratosphere.

In 2012 the Wagners decided to give more than 500 works from their extensive collection to the Whitney Museum of American Art, where about 120 of them will go on view on Friday.

Shows featuring donor collections can be problematic, given potential conflicts of interest, and the Whitney presents such exhibitions only when a significant number of the works are coming to the museum.

Image



Jeff Koons's "Poodle," from 1991. Credit... Hilary Swift for The New York Times

“We’re delighted to be able to celebrate collectors when they’re going to make donations,” said Adam D. Weinberg, the museum’s director, adding, “We would never have committed to do a major show and a major catalog if we did not believe in the entirety of the collection.”

Organized by the Whitney curator Elisabeth Sussman — with Christine Macel, the chief curator at the Pompidou Center in Paris, which is getting more than 300 works by non-American artists from the couple — the show represents a highly personal collection.

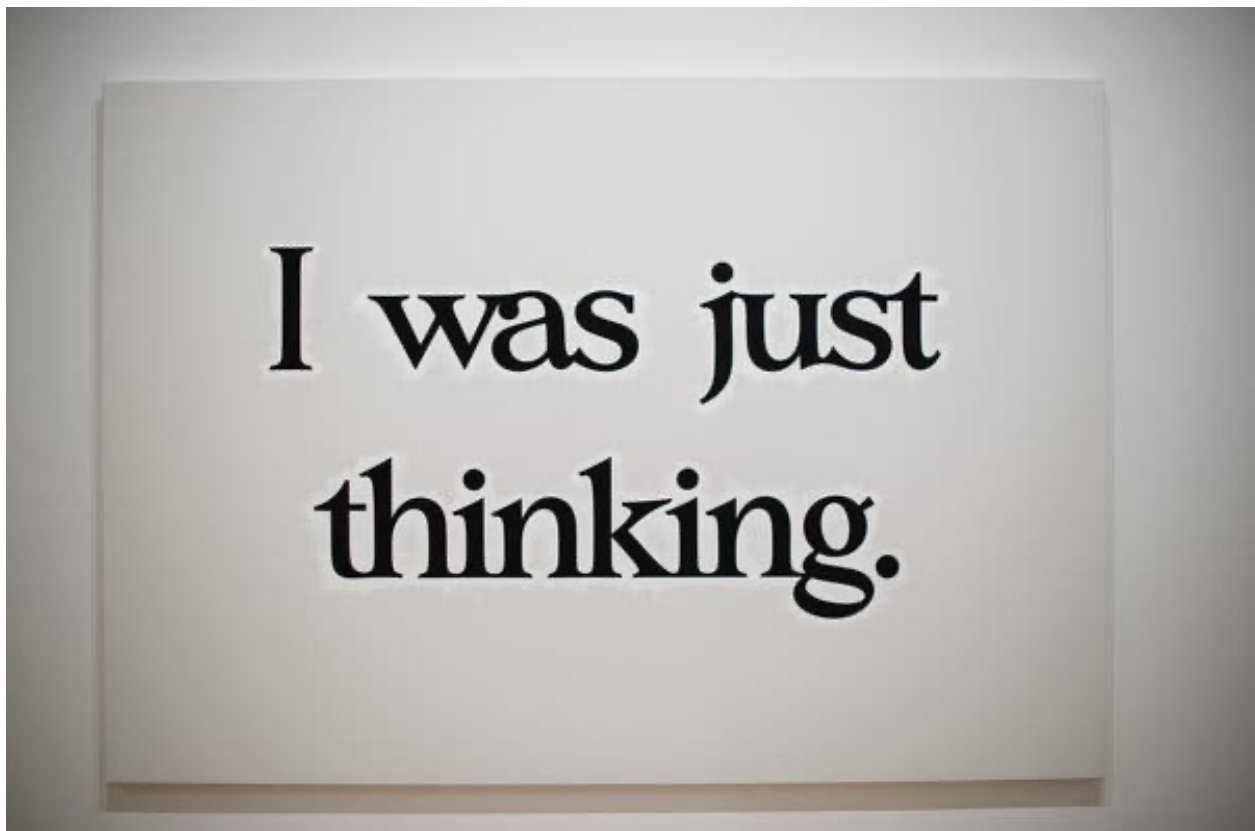
Walking through the Whitney galleries the other day, as their pieces were being hung around them, the Wagners recalled buying Robert Gober’s 1985 “Ascending Sink” — two stacked (nonworking) sinks mounted on the wall — right out of the artist’s studio. They pointed out Danh Vo’s 2009 chandelier, hanging in a corner of the sixth floor. They recalled discussing Mr. Wool’s “Untitled” (2002) — a large piece featuring strong brush

strokes that greets visitors as they step off the elevator — over countless meals when it hung on their dining room wall.

“They’re not just inanimate objects,” Mr. Wagner said. “They’re the best part of our history.”

Why give so much of it away now? It isn’t the tax benefit, Mr. Wagner said, noting, “We will never have enough income to use the possible deductions.” And the Wagners held back some pieces for their five children (three from her previous marriage, two from his) and their nine grandchildren. They also kept some to sell so they can acquire new work, which they continue to do — often by emerging artists. “We don’t buy Koons or Wool now,” Mr. Wagner said.

The Wagners — he is 74, she 73 — wanted to see their collection in important institutions in their lifetimes. “We can still walk around a museum without stumbling over ourselves,” Mr. Wagner said, “and we’ve got the energy for it.”



Ricci Albenda’s “I was just thinking.” Credit...Hilary Swift for The New York Times

The two started dating in 1990, when Ms. Westreich Wagner was already a prominent art adviser and collector, and Mr. Wagner had begun collecting while running his public affairs consulting firm.

They married in 1994, and their connection has been inextricably bound up with their obsession. They eliminated fireplaces and windows in their Mercer Street apartment to make more wall space. They have never disagreed on a work of art — well, “close to never,” Mr. Wagner said.

“We mutually become interested or we mutually lose interest,” he added.

They play a game at museums and galleries in which they each pick out a favorite and compare their choices, as they did in Dresden, looking at two rooms of work by Lucas Cranach. They separately picked out the same piece, as they almost always do. (During an interview — he in a blue sweater with glasses hanging around his neck, she in a sleek black leather jacket — they commend each other’s aesthetic judgment and finish each other’s sentences.)

Eventually, Mr. Wagner joined her business, and the two have been traveling the world, befriending artists and acquiring treasures before they were sanctioned by the marketplace, like the Goyer sinks. “It was very bold to buy that when they didn’t know what he was going to be,” said Ms. Sussman, the Whitney curator.

The collection they have built over the decades defies easy categorization, ranging as it does from the 1950s to the present, with photography by Diane Arbus, works on paper by Sol LeWitt and pieces by younger artists like Anne Collier, Gareth James and Rirkrit Tiravanija. It is particularly strong in works from the 1980s and 1990s.

Image

Robert Goyer’s 1985 “Ascending Sink” and Danh Vo’s 2009 chandelier. Credit... Hilary Swift for The New York Times

“There’s a lot that has humor in it,” Mr. Wagner said. “There’s a fair amount that is a commentary on the economics of our time, on the social difficulties of our time, on the politics of our time.”

It hasn’t all been smooth going. In 2004 Ms. Westreich Wagner’s company, Art Advisory Services, pleaded guilty to failing to collect New York City sales tax on over \$5 million in art sales and paid a \$250,000 fine. Mr. Wagner pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor count involving filing a false business tax return to the city.

The Whitney show marks a high point for them; artists in their collection from all over the world showed up for an opening dinner on Tuesday night, even those who were not included in the current exhibition.

The show has allowed the Wagners to see their collection in a new light — they were struck by the curators’ juxtaposition of the abstract photography of Eileen Quinlan and the activist photography of David Wojnarowicz, for example — and to view some works that were too big for their home, like “Weeding Aralia,” Simon Starling’s sprawling 2002 screen print.

It also offers a window onto two collectors’ approach to buying art, which Ms. Sussman said was exemplified by the title of a Ricci Albenda acrylic on linen piece from 2009, “I was just thinking,” which is featured in the show.

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**“This is what they encourage us to do — you have to think about things,” she said.
“That’s what they like about collecting — how it makes your mind work as well as your eyes.”**

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