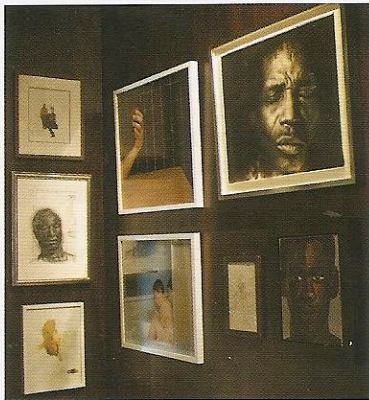


Collector Conversations

Are some people biologically drawn to art? Having nurtured a collection since 1988, Dr. Daniel S. Berger thinks so. Writer Alica Eler visited Dr. Berger's home, and the two discussed how a collection's theme takes shape, how art adds balance to a stressful life, and how this collector is inspired by the challenges many artists face.

"I believe there is an art gene," says Dr. Dan Berger, as we lounge in his kitchen. Dan laughs, explaining that he means it as a way "to help distinguish people who understand and are very interested in art, compared with a broader audience of those who hold little interest, or are incapable of finding their way around a museum." It's 9pm and Dan is sipping a cup of coffee he's flavored with a tablespoon of Cool Whip. We've just strolled through his collection, which covers the walls and floors of his North Side home. It focuses on a medley of areas: work by Queer artists, art about African-American identity, work by outsider artists, as well as Chicagoans. The names are familiar - Rashid Johnson, Elizabeth Murray, Angel Otero, Kerry James Marshall, Stan Shellabarger and Dutes Miller, and Doug Ischar - all are in good company amongst works by cornerstone contemporary artists like Nan Goldin and Robert Mapplethorpe.



Pictured clockwise, from top left: Otobenga Jones & Associates; Carrie Schneider; Rashid Johnson; Mark Jackson; Italian, portrait drawing, late 1700's / early 1800's (artist unknown); Carrie Schneider; Rachael Niffenegger; John Wilson

ALICIA: How did you start collecting art?

DAN: I was always drawn to art, but I didn't have any real exposure to it until college. I came from a very traditional family—my parents had a strong work ethic, but they didn't have the benefit of a college education. When I took an art history course in college, I was under a spell. I majored in literature, and my curriculum favored pairing periods of literature to the same periods of history and art. When I was doing an internship after medical school, moonlighting working emergency rooms as a medical doctor, I began buying art in my free time. Living in New York City, I often walked past a West Village gallery that exhibited work by Andy Warhol. I started thinking of collecting contemporary art, and the first piece I bought was a Warhol *Electric Chair*. This was in 1988. I didn't have the money, but I made payments to the gallery over a long period of time.

The second piece I bought was by Ed Paschke—also didn't have the money for that. I appreciated that both Warhol and Paschke created surprising work. Warhol wasn't afraid to idolize anything—everyday American objects, and electric chairs. Paschke's bold character depictions, especially in his early work, were crazy shocking. The gallery [that sold me the Paschke] sent me notes, writing "send us a check, please Dan!" They underlined "please Dan." [laughs] I hoped living with art would help me attain some balance in my life. Once I became a medical doctor with earnings, I started regularly buying art.

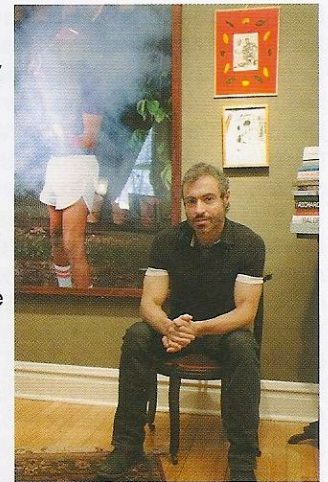
ALICIA: Why does your collection focus on Queerness, African American identity, outsider artists, and Chicago artists?

DAN: I buy what I am truly interested in, what speaks to me. I don't buy for investment. A collection's focus doesn't happen in a moment's notice, but instead derives from reflection, consideration, deliberation and conscious as well as subconscious thought. I'm carefree and uninhibited when asking artists questions, and I like having open discussions with gallery owners, curators and art educators.

The fierceness of many Queer artists and many African American artists runs parallel to my own work. More than 20 years ago, whenever I would tell other doctors that I specialized in AIDS, it was not uncommon to encounter raised eyebrows and a kind of sneer in response. I was steadfast and resolute about the importance of my work without regard to other peoples' opinions, and I think I've identified with this particular determination of provocative Queer artists and African American artists who have a strong sense of pride about who they are, despite any adverse public opinion about their work and views. Only fairly recently did African American artists and Queer artists start to receive more mainstream attention. The recent John Hawkins retrospective at the Art Institute of Chicago, and the inclusion in major museum collections of work by Kehinde Wiley and Kerry James Marshall are examples of art that wouldn't have been commonly viewed not long ago. My personal interest well preceded what's become "in vogue."

Similarly, true "outsider" artists are completely beyond the mainstream, living isolated and without education; they express their identity without paying attention to society. And my interest in work by

Chicago artists relates to my sense of pride and self-identification; I am a Chicagoan (with a slight Brooklyn accent, since I was born and raised there.) I take pleasure in supporting Chicago artists.



In front of Rashid Johnson's *Self-portrait as the black Jimmy Connors in the finals of the New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club Summer Tennis Tournament*, 2008.

ALICIA: Tell us how you decided to open the artist project space Iceberg Projects in 2010.

DAN: I read a *New York Times* article 4 years ago called *Welcome to the Museum of My Stuff*. Some important collectors, unsatisfied with institutions and what they were showing, decided to mount their own exhibitions. One of them bought a space on a main street in his city, created a small gallery/museum, and showed what he wanted to show. I also knew that [Miami collectors] the Rubells were doing their own thing. So I thought, 'I could do this too'—it just takes drive, energy, and a dedication to artists. I talked to my friend Robert McNeil, who is an architect, and he began measuring around the property of my home. We decided to use the architecture of an old coach house to make a unique state-of-the-art exhibition space.

The Iceberg Committee, comprised of Doug Ischar, John Neff, Dianna Frid, Robert McNeil, Zak Arctander, and myself decides what we'll show. We're particularly interested in giving artists outside Chicago exposure here they otherwise wouldn't have, and bring new, challenging work to the city. More at icebergchicago.com

ALICIA : How does art help you create balance in your life?

DAN: When I started specializing in HIV / AIDS there was a lack of treatment for it; people were suffering and dying. It was very difficult to maintain my sanity. I spent many sleepless nights struggling to help patients, working on research for new treatments. Enjoying and appreciating art was a welcome distraction that helped me maintain intensity in my medical work.