

BEL-AIRVIEW

A WESTSIDE TODAY PUBLICATION



Billie Milam Weisman An Obsession with Art

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CONTEMPORARY COLLECTOR: BILLIE MILAM WEISMAN

Interview by Caroline Ryder

Photo by Joel Bell

Visitors to the Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation in Holmby Hills are in for a treat. There are more than 500 contemporary works of art at the Estate, comprising less than half the collection. These include super realistic nude sculptures in the various powder rooms that were placed around the lavish residence prior to Frederick Weisman's death in 1994. Weisman, an entrepreneur and philanthropist, built up one of the most significant collections of modern and contemporary art in the US. Since then, the estate has been gifted to the foundation as a museum. Billie, an established museum professional, is director of the Art Foundation. Docent tours of the estate are available to visitors upon request. Visitors can view works by key artists like Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, Andy Warhol, Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg, David Hockney, Roy Lichtenstein, Henry Moore, Frank Stella and Ed Ruscha, all in a residential environment. Visit www.weismanfoundation.org or call 310 277 5321 for more information.

Where does your love of contemporary art stem from?

I've loved art since I was a child: I sculpted figures out of clay in the back seat of the car on the way to wherever we happened to be going, in addition to painting my dresses in art class. Later, I think my background as a museum professional, in art history and sculpture conservation grounded this and taught me to love contemporary art. It really does reflect the most current trends of our contemporary culture.

Why do you think some people are frightened of contemporary art?

Simply because they feel they don't, or can't, understand it. People may be somewhat frightened of abstraction because it is a "visual" language which they may not be

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familiar with, or exposed to very much.

Why did you and your husband decide to open the collection to the public?

Fred felt that when you are fortunate in business you need to give back in a meaningful way. He used to say "I don't think there's anything that communicates better than art. It's quicker than language and clearer than philosophy." Art is a wonderful way to open up creative thinking, even for scientists and other non-art professions. The experience of viewing art in a home-like environment may actually make it easier for people to understand contemporary artwork. Fred also put contemporary art in his corporate headquarters which were designed by Frank Gehry several decades ago. The employees were a bit uncomfortable with both the architecture and the selection of the artwork! However when Fred later tried to rotate the art, the employees had become so attached that they asked if it could remain in place!

Describe some of most memorable reactions visitors have had to a piece of art.

We get so many different responses to our eclectic range of contemporary works that it would be hard to say...everything from the Superrealist "Florida Shopper" (a figure of a woman dressed in polyester and be-jeweled in plastic by Duane Hanson) surprising someone from around the corner, to the sublime spirituality of the luscious colors of the Rothko. We get a lot of strong responses.

You have a lot of life-like figures around the estate - have they ever startled visitors?

Yes, in mischievous ways. One time a window washer reported a "dead man" in the office (Hanson's "Old Man Dozing"). Security came and reported that it was not a "dead man" but merely a "dummy"!

Which artwork at the estate is your favorite or evokes the fondest memories of Fred?

All of them have different fond memories, so it would be hard to single out any one work. When Fred would be asked which work was his favorite he would answer by saying "do you have children?" In other words, you love each of them in a different way.

How did your late husband Frederick influence your views on art and vice versa?



Billie Milam Weisman

That's a big question - he taught me so many things, but most importantly he taught me to trust my instincts in what I liked. When you look at a lot of art, your instincts draw you to the best even if you don't have a lot of money to spend. I think I influenced him most with my art conservation back-

ground in helping protect and preserve the collection for future generations.

How do you see your role within the Los Angeles art community?

Our biggest role is to share contemporary art with the public by continuing to collect works by emerging artists, and also by encouraging an environment for a dialogue about it to take place.

Who are the finest artists living and working in southern California today?

There are many wonderful artists working in Los Angeles today, many that we have in the collec-

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tion. Probably the one artist that has given Los Angeles international fame is Ed Ruscha, who will be representing the USA at the next Venice Biennale. John Baldessari and Mike Kelly live and work in LA: Tim Hawkinson who currently has a show at the Whitney Museum lives in LA. Joel Morrison and Kaz Oshira currently in a show called "Thing" at the Hammer Museum. Bill Viola, Laura Owens...the list goes on and on....are all making an international impact while working in LA.

What has prompted the evolution of LA into a major international art center in the last two decades?

LA has long had a reputation for being a place where anything can happen, beginning with the Ferus Art Gallery which introduced California in the mid 1950s to such artists as Kienholtz, Kaufmann, Berman, Moses, Irwin, and NY artists such as Lichtenstein, Warhol, Judd, Stella, Rauschenberg and Johns. I think that through some of the major architectural projects, such as Frank Gehry's Disney Hall, MOCA by the Japanese architect Arata Isozaki, Richard Meyer for the Getty, and Renzo Piano for the new expansion of LACMA, as well as the fact that there are so many really great art schools such as Art Center School of Design, CalArts and UCLA to name a few, shows that an environment that fosters creativity can produce the best in contemporary art. Good architecture and a stimulating environment can help to further develop the creative process. As Fred always said 'good art holds up', and we are now seeing California art recognized internationally.

Is there any one piece of art you would not want to lend out?

No, everything needs to be shared. The estate was left to the Foundation in a home-like environment which is to remain intact, while the majority of the collection is lent or traveled with exhibitions. Generally, it is only if a work is too fragile that we would not be able to lend it, or if the environment to which it is to be lent might be hazardous to the artwork itself.