

COLLECTOR FOCUS

Latin America

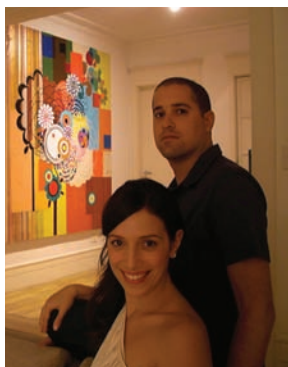
BY JULIA COOKE

Just as Latin American art has, in the last decade, moved onto the global stage, its collectors have ventured into the spotlight, as well. These days, an ever more powerful cadre of collectors exhibits a relatively new phenomenon: “Ten or fifteen years ago, most of the contemporary-art collections in Latin America consisted of local artwork. The large majority of Brazilian collections were basically of Brazilian art. In this last decade, those collections have begun to open beyond their own borders,” says Adriano Pedrosa, the São Paulo-based writer and curator who will moderate the Art Basel Conversations panel on Latin American collectors. Each of the collectors below in their own way exhibits this shift in focus, which coincides with the international global programs of galleries around the world.



César Cervantes

In the initial phases of his now nearly 550-piece collection, Mexico City collector César Cervantes focused on sub-collections of works by artists like Dieter Roth, Paul McCarthy, Jimmie Durham, On Kawara and Mexican artists such as Gabriel Orozco and Daniel Guzmán. While those works still form the backbone of Cervantes' collection, recent years have seen him branching out to works by artists both younger and further abroad; he recently bought his first piece of art by a young Chinese artist. “I began collecting because of a desire to live my daily life surrounded by artwork,” he says. As such, all works are kept between his office and home, where art is very present in his everyday life—and the lives of his neighbors. Under the winding azaleas outside of his Mexico City house sits a huge Jimmie Durham site-specific work, an old Chrysler sedan crushed by an eight-ton rock with painted-on eyes and mouth. In the last two years, Cervantes has also begun to sponsor local exhibits, book publications and a residency program for young artists.



Jay & Claudia Khalifeh

Jay and Claudia Khalifeh began to collect artwork 10 years ago as a practical matter: They had recently moved into a São Paulo apartment with lots of wall space. Their interest in contemporary art combined with Khalifeh's frequent traveling to make for a nascent collection of international artwork. Today, while their burgeoning collection has long since outgrown their apartment—they now rent a space nearby for exhibition and storage—living with art still shapes what the couple buys. Their collection is largely directed by their taste, which ranges from John Baldessari to Richard Prince, Elizabeth Peyton to Beatriz Milhazes, rather than a specific collecting focus. “We buy artists whom we like,” says Jay, and they live with what they buy. And as for playing favorites, indecision is a hazard of living with art you love, he says. “Every day we like one better than all the others.”



Juan & Patricia Vergez

After many years of collecting artwork with his wife, Patricia, Argentine collector Juan Vergez says he no longer likes to make a clear distinction between Latin American and international artwork. “Art is one, and artists have a common language that isn't divided regionally,” he says. Replace “artists” with “collectors” and Vergez's statement stands, although living in Latin America does impose certain conditions onto the act of collecting. There are pros and cons, he says: While he may be far away from many of the galleries from which he purchases art, Vergez benefits from a certain degree of isolation. “We're less polluted, less saturated. My eye is open to see what's extremely different in today's art; a collector living in Berlin might find it harder to see what's new amid such a broad offering,” he explains. Not a surprise, then, that their collection, which is spread between their home and a nearly 12,000-square-foot space in Buenos Aires, is “absolutely young, absolutely emerging.”