Just Looking | Collective Identity

Culture

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By LESLIE CAMHI
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Patricia Wall/The New York Times Cuisine Art: The Sculls pretend to cook on their Claes Oldenberg stove.

On a recent Saturday afternoon, a line of people waited to get into the Acquavella Gallery on New York's Upper East Side. Inside, the usually serene halls were abuzz with decades-old gossip. People had come to see the legendary art collection of Robert and Ethel Scull; among the onlookers were those who knew the couple in their

heyday as the Mom and Pop of Pop Art.

Their story (as recounted in curator Judith Goldman's catalog) was something of a neighborhood affair. Robert Scull, the taxi magnate, and his fashion-forward wife Ethel (known as "Spike") had lived across the street from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in an art-filled apartment at 1010 Fifth Avenue, where Andy Warhol's improvisationally glamorous *Ethel Skull 36 Times* (the artist's first commissioned portrait) hung in the entry hall, with a Jasper Johns *Target* and a bronze by Mark di Suvero. There, mugging for the cameras (which seemed to follow them everywhere) the couple pretended to cook dinner on a Claes Oldenberg stove. An all-white living room set off canvases by Willem De Kooning and sculpture by John Chamberlain. A painting by James Rosenquist formed the backdrop to glittering dinner parties; another Rosenquist hung suspended from the bedroom ceiling.

Robert, the son of a Jewish tailor from the Lower East Side and a frustrated artist, married Ethel (a Riverside Drive princess) and by the mid 1950s had built their share of her father's taxi business into a lucrative concern. A rambunctious personality, he had something of the big-game hunter about him, preferring to acquire works fresh from artists' studios, sometimes before they were even completed. As a collector, he came late to Abstract Expressionism (though still assembled key works) before falling hard for the new art — nobody yet called it Pop — which, as he explained in a 1964 interview, "will show us who and what we really are."

But art is a harsh mistress, and the glare of celebrity even harsher. In 1973, the Sculls sold 50 works from their collection in a notorious auction at Sotheby's that netted them over $2.2 million and is widely credited with ushering in today's market in contemporary art. Robert Rauschenberg, whose early combine, *Thaw*, sold for almost 100 times what the Sculls had paid for it, accused the taxi magnate of profiteering. The couple was excoriated in the press; a bitter divorce (lasting over a decade) followed, and most of the remaining collection was sold off to pay creditors and lawyers.

The 44 works on loan to Acquavella include only a fraction of what the couple once owned, yet their range and quality is astonishing. And perhaps it was the quasi-domestic setting of an Upper East Side townhouse (with works by Bruce Nauman and Frank Stella hanging above the fireplace mantels, and the couple's double portrait, their forms encased in plaster by George Segal, presiding over the upstairs salon), but the atmosphere that afternoon reminded me of a shiva call, paid in honor of this dead couple and the art that once propelled them into the fishbowl of society, and later divided them. Ethel Scull, an older woman recalled, was the type who took more than one book to the beauty parlor; another doyenne in a beige suit whispered about her late-in-life paranoia.

With my glasses off (and to my embarrassment), I had just mistaken the art journalist Judd Tully for the art critic and historian Jed Perl — both rangy, white-haired, and with a professional interest in American art of the 50s and 60s — when Irving Sandler, who knew the Sculls back in the day, swept by. "I'm off to weep for my youth," explained the bushy-browed art historian, who in the 1950s managed the Tanager Gallery on 10th Street, where the likes of Alex Katz got his start.

The entire visit got me thinking about artists and collectors, a relationship whose terms have changed considerably in the past decade, as the art market's power and reach has expanded exponentially. A European conceptual artist, who has spent decades at the top of the heap, recently admitted to me over lunch in Paris that he feared he'd been mistaken in never wanting to know the people who collected his work; today a Francois Pinault, he observed ruefully, wields infinitely more influence than any critic.

A drive to purchase one's way into a certain social caste, a longing to share (if momentarily) in the risks of bohemian life or art's intellectual adventure, a belief in art as a kind of religion (its icons compelling sacrifice), a need to cushion one's surroundings with objects of beauty or significance — who can say what complex motives go into the acquisition of works of art? The prospect of financial gain was, until recently, low on the list. The single-minded Peggy Guggenheim marched around to artists' studios in a Paris under the threat of German invasion, armed with a shopping list compiled by her adviser Herbert Reade. "A painting a day," was her motto

— and given the desperate circumstances of most of the artists she visited, only Picasso showed her to the door. Andre Breton, on the other hand, whose remarkable collection was in many ways the detritus of a life in art, hung paintings by the foot of his bed, to glimpse them, upon waking, by the light of the unconscious. For him, they were conduits to another world.

I have witnessed first hand the curious dance of seduction between artists and collectors — people whose reciprocal needs meet across every conceivable divide of wealth, lifestyle, education and social standing. Yes, money changes hands, and the value of investments are measured. But fundamentally, the collector needs to fall in love; and the artist needs to feel that he or she is being loved for the right reasons. (The accusations currently being played out in court about the alleged blacklist kept by the South African painter Marlene Dumas — preventing collectors who make a quick profit by reselling her works at auction from acquiring more choice works — have all the earmarks of a lover's quarrel.)

Artists, after all, are notoriously uncompromising personalities, as Eddie Redmayne, the young British actor who plays the assistant to Mark Rothko in the Broadway play *Red,* makes abundantly clear. Three-quarters of the way through the play, the assistant, who has been taking it on the chin from Alfred Molina's monomaniacal Rothko, explodes in frustration. "But then nothing is ever good enough for you!" he rails. "Not even the people who buy your pictures! Museums are nothing but mausoleums, galleries are run by pimps and swindlers, and art collectors are nothing but shallow social-climbers. So who is good enough to own your art?! Anyone?! Or maybe the real question is: who is good enough to even see your art? Is it just possible no one is worthy to look at your paintings?"

Having lived in the shadow of artists, I found myself nodding uncontrollably at this point, and when a dealer I knew, who happened to be seated in the row in front of me, rose at the show's end, we exchanged rueful glances. She, too, was familiar with the personality type under discussion.

The Sculls owned a quartet of Rothkos (all of them red, to varying degrees), though Rothko didn't become a family friend like De Kooning and Barnett Newman did. But years later, in speaking about land artist Michael Heizer (whose monumental carvings into the remote Nevada desert were financed by Scull), you can hear the taxi magnate-turned-art patron breathing a sigh of astonishment mixed with relief, at having escaped the collector's mantle. "When you land on one of those dry lakes thirty miles outside of Vegas, there's nothing but miles and miles of desert," Scull recalled. "And when I saw this…sculpture in the ground…surrounded by a world of nature, I began to realize that this is some of the most important sculpture in the world, and that it's not necessary to take it home to Fifth Avenue."