

ArtReview



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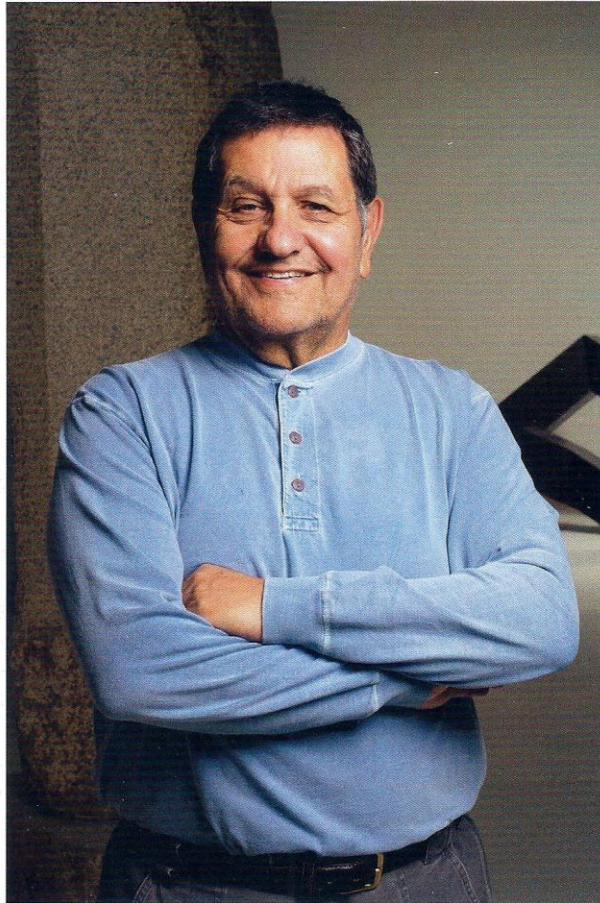
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Great Collectors and Their Ideas

No 3

Martin Margulies

Interview by Joshua Mack



One of a handful of world-class collectors in Miami, developer and philanthropist Martin Margulies has shaped the cultural and built fabric of South Florida since he began building and buying in the 1970s. His art holdings, which number over 4,500 works and are particularly rich in photography and large-scale sculpture, are the basis of rotating exhibitions at a warehouse space that opened to the public in 1999 and has offered educational programmes since 2003. Admission fees benefit Lotus House, a shelter and advocacy group for homeless women and children for which Margulies recently purchased a building to house at-risk teenagers.

ARTREVIEW *When did you begin collecting? What was your initial focus?*

MARTIN MARGULIES I began buying art by purchasing prints by various artists. A good friend and I got together and purchased the Volland Suite by Picasso. We had to hunt down a few of the prints that were missing from the suite, which was an interesting and pleasurable process. I began reading and studying about art and the art market and became intrigued by what I was learning. One of the things I remember was reading about the taxi tycoon Robert C. Scull and his wife Ethel, who sold 50 paintings and sculptures from their renowned collection of Pop art for what were, at that time, unheard-of prices for art by living artists. I decided there must be something to the art market that warranted my attention, so I kept reading and looking and eventually made a commitment to become a collector. I attended a Contemporary sale at Sotheby's in 1976 where I was the underbidder for a bronze work by Isamu Noguchi. After the sale an intriguing woman named Shaindy Fenton (an art consultant from Fort Worth, Texas) tapped me on the shoulder and explained she knew where to get me the Noguchi I wanted. Shaindy knew Noguchi and Leo Castelli and Claes Oldenburg and just about everyone in the contemporary artworld. We became great friends and she introduced me to a lot of people. She used to work with Raymond and Patsy Nasher on their collection and for a while I would join them visiting all the galleries. Eventually I went out on my own, and unfortunately Shaindy passed away when she was still young from diabetes. I dedicated the book on my sculpture collection to Shaindy.

AR *I've read that a turning point for you was your acquisition of John De Andrea's Blonde Woman Holding Dress (1977), a piece that seems to encapsulate a state of introspection and vulnerability. What about the sculpture clicked for you and how did it change your sense of what art and collecting could mean to you?*

MM The sculpture was an early acquisition, and I have lived with it in my home for almost 40 years. It went out on loan only one time, to the De Andrea retrospective at the Kunst Haus Wien during the early 1990s, and I really missed the work when it was out of the collection. The figure is diminutive and the posture is very human in the way the female figure is holding the cloth in a modest demeanour. When I purchased the work from the late dealer and artworld personality Ivan Karp I was already committed to building a collection, but I was just getting to know Ivan. We went on to become friends and I have great memories of all our entertaining conversations and

correspondence. His gallery in Soho, OK Harris, has a great stable of realist artists – in fact I just purchased a wonderful work by Masao Gozu from the gallery, and the artist, who is Japanese, is coming to Miami next week to install the sculpture (a realist structure depicting a fragment of a brick facade of a building which includes plants growing on the brick surface and a working window) at our public Warehouse facility for the season.

AR *You saw the De Andrea at OK Harris. What was it that led you to Ivan's? And more broadly to Soho? What year was that?*

MM It was in 1977. I have a residence in New York and travel often to the city to look at all the exhibitions. Soho was in its nascent stage back then and there was a raw quality to the scene with all the industrial buildings, old streets and warehouses. OK Harris had new exhibitions

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once a month, usually by three different artists, so there was always something interesting to see. There was a real energy to the place, with artists coming and going. Ivan would look at any submission by any artist. He was constantly looking at new work. I saw Duane Hanson there and all these wonderful photorealist painters. I don't really collect photorealism much anymore but I still enjoy the works. An interesting thing happened recently with the John De Andrea sculpture. About two weeks ago, we were installing a very large installation work at our Warehouse by and with the Chinese artist Song Dong. The work, *The Wisdom of the Poor: A Communal Courtyard* was exhibited by him in 2011 at the Venice Biennale, and we are featuring the work as a major part of our exhibition at the Warehouse this season. It is comprised of 100 wardrobe doors from 100 Chinese families that lived together in one of the very poorest

neighbourhoods in Beijing during the 1950s and 60s. When Song Dong visited my private collection he saw the John De Andrea sculpture, which was placed in my bedroom with other works. He became mesmerised by the figure and asked us if he could borrow it and install it in the middle of his installation so that the mirrors of the wardrobe doors would reflect the blonde woman throughout his work. Of course we agreed. The effect is stunning – as you walk through Song Dong's work, you see the elusive reflection of the blonde woman standing alone, eyes cast downward, clutching a cloth to cover herself. So this will be the second time the work will be out of my home on loan, but this time it is close by at the Warehouse where thousands of people will have the opportunity to experience the sculpture in a new way.

AR *What was the art community like in Miami at that time?*

MM At that time Miami had a small but interesting seasonal art scene. There were world-class collectors such as Norman and Irma Braman, Mitchell Wolfson, Jr and Carlos and Rosa de la Cruz, who were active with their collections. I was developing my own collection and opened the outdoor sculpture portion of the collection to the public in 1979. Artists such as Bob Rauschenberg, John Chamberlain and Jim Rosenquist visited Miami frequently and took up residences on the west coast. I became friends with Isamu Noguchi and he would stay with me when he was working on a public project for Bayfront Park in downtown Miami. There was a lot of activity within the private collections. Like most collectors everywhere, the private collectors in Miami were very generous in opening up their homes to groups of serious people who are active in the artworld. By the 1980s, Miami was already an artworld destination for out-of-town groups. Museum curators and directors from all over the country would bring their patron groups to Miami to tour the private collections in an effort to educate their supporters about collecting and connoisseurship.

AR *Still, it seems to have changed since then. How would you describe the city's evolution as an art centre? How much effect has Art Basel had on the scene?*

MM Miami is home to five of the top 200 collectors in the world. Art Basel has brought a global artworld audience to Miami. People know there is something going on and everyone wants in on it, so to speak. It is an exciting time for Miami. But you have to remember Art Basel is just five days of the year. It's a struggle for the local dealers and art professionals the remaining 360 days.

AR You, among several other collectors in the community, have established spaces to present your collection to the public. Those efforts predate the fair, of course. When did you decide to take this step and what led you to it?

MM We opened the Margulies Collection at the Warehouse in 1999. My longtime curator, Katherine Hinds, and I were searching for a way to accommodate my growing photography collection. We began looking for a warehouse storage facility and decided it would be safer and healthier for the works – and more interesting for us – if we hung them on the walls rather than just storing them in stacks. We had been doing exhibitions culled from the collection for many years with museums and universities, so it was a natural decision to open the warehouse to the public and do our own seasonal exhibitions. We started with photography then expanded to video and sculpture, and installation art, and recently added paintings. We went through a series of three expansions and have 45,000 sq ft [4,200sqm] of space. Each year we do a new exhibition that normally includes several hundred works of art from the collection.

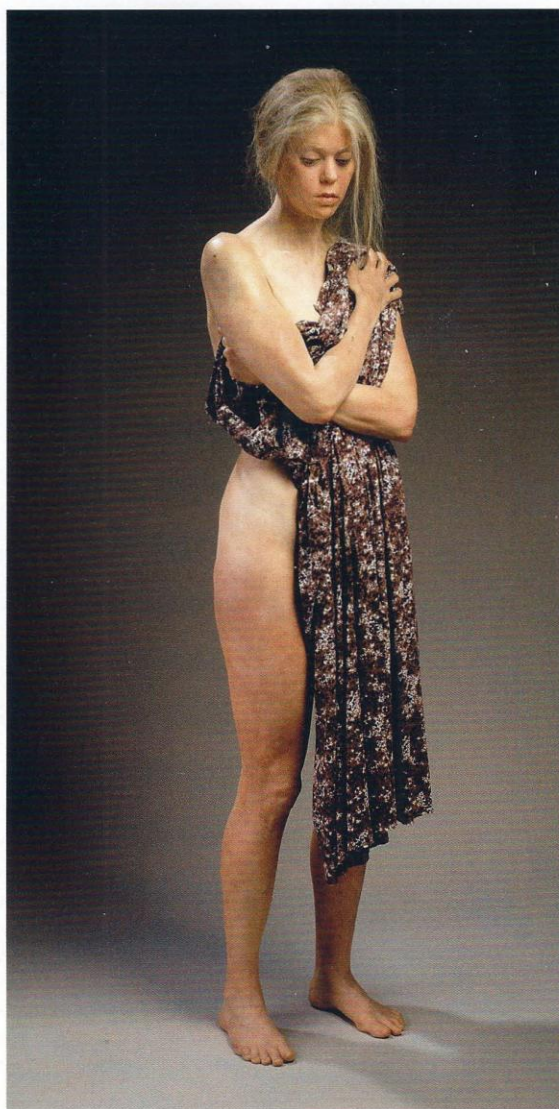
AR Was there a role you were hoping to fill in the community? Perhaps more specifically, how have the spaces been a response to the paucity of public institutions that match, at least until now, the vigorous engagement Miami collectors have with the arts?

MM Our space was never a response to other institutions. And we didn't look at the collection as filling a role. Once you become involved with educating people through exposing them to great art, especially young people, you get excited and you want to do a good job, and so that's what we do. Occasionally we will come across a great work, such as the three-ton truck with 14-screen video installation by Barry McGee that we look at as an especially poignant work, which will resonate with some of the young students that make up our audience. So we are particularly inclined and motivated to add certain works to the collection because of their educational qualities and potential. We found that the video installations are what young students respond to the most. We think we can provide young people with an

experience that can expand their capacity to understand our culture and the world around them. We are glad when teachers bring their new students back to the collection year after year or include a visit to us as part of their curriculum.

AR Admission to your collection is by donation to Lotus House, a shelter for homeless women and children in Miami. But is there a deeper connection? An underlying sense of obligation or an interest in social justice?

MM Yes, we charge adults \$10 admission to our facility with all proceeds going directly to the homeless shelter. Students are free of charge. In addition all proceeds from our books sales and an annual fundraiser, as well as tours and other initiatives we host, go directly to the Lotus House, which supports women and children who have fallen through the cracks and are desperately trying to make a better life for themselves.



John De Andrea, *Blonde Woman Holding Dress*, 1977, polychromed vinyl, 157 × 36 × 30 cm

AR Does that, or has that, sense of involvement and empathy affect the kind of work you collect? Is there something you believe the arts can teach us as human beings and as members of a society?

MM Not really, no. Each of us responds to art in a very personal, subjective way. I can say that there is a portion of the collection – mainly the social documentation works in the photography collection – that involves the human condition. We have several hundred photographs by Lewis Hine from the early decades of the twentieth century that document child labour and which led to changes in our society that protect children from abusive labour practices. I collect Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange in depth, and they documented the poverty of rural American families during the Depression. There is a dignity to the suffering and everydayness of people in these photographs that one can equate with the urban homeless people of today. I empathise with the human suffering I see in these photos and the poverty I see on the streets of Miami and other cities. It's frustrating to see the waste and foolishness of our government.

AR On the other hand, you are a real-estate developer, so in essence, you are creating environments for people to live in and curating aspects of the city. Has your thinking about art affected how you imagine the spaces you build, or vice versa?

MM Yes, it has to a degree. The buildings I build must be functional and be attractive to the market I am reaching out to, whether it is families or retirees. While many of my buildings have beautiful public areas, generally I do not put art in these public areas. Everybody has a different point of view and I would not want to subject the residents of my buildings to my ideas of what art is to me.

AR What are your hopes for the collection and Miami as a cultural centre in the future?

MM My hope is to get through Art Basel Miami Beach. People ask me what is the best part about the Art Basel week? I always say... when it's over. While it is very exhilarating and fun to see many of my friends from around the world, it is exhausting. When it's over, I need a vacation.