

Collecting

Art collectors who turn obstacles into opportunities

Andrew and Christine Hall talk about the challenges of collecting and exhibiting across two continents



Andrew and Christine Hall © Martine Fougeron

Julie Belcove MAY 26 2017



In 2005, art collectors Andrew and Christine Hall bought the renowned German painter Georg Baselitz's personal trove of about 120 artworks that he had acquired over the years, mostly from his friends and contemporaries. A year or so later, at Baselitz's suggestion, they bought Schloss Derneburg, the estate where he had lived and painted for 30 years. The Halls had been thinking about building a museum. What better place to house the expressionist visions of such master postwar artists as Eugen Schönebeck, AR Penck, Markus Lüpertz and Baselitz himself than the sprawling Derneburg, a nearly 1,000-year-old castle that long served as a monastery?

Last year, with the renovations nearly complete, their plans to exhibit German art in a German landmark outside the German city of Hanover were suddenly dashed by an unlikely culprit:

Germany. The Bundestag and Bundesrat passed [a highly restrictive cultural heritage law](#) — in the face of fierce protests by the country’s art community — that authorised the banning of export outside the EU of artworks more than 50 years old and valued at over €150,000, and inside the EU of works over 75 years old and worth more than €300,000. If the Halls kept their collection at Derneburg, it might have to stay there for good.

“We had an art truck turn up the week the law was passed, and all those early works were gone,” recalls Andrew, who is chief executive of Astenbeck Capital Management and goes by “Andy”. The Swiss warehouse that received the scores of artworks, he says, saw a veritable traffic jam of trucks arriving from Germany. “The law is totally stupid. The idea was to prevent the flight of artworks from Germany, but it had the exact opposite effect. Crazy.”

On an overcast spring afternoon, after the markets have closed, Andy and Christine, a British-born couple in their sixties, are sitting in their Chelsea pied-à-terre. The apartment walls are pristinely white and starkly blank. The Halls have just completed a three-year renovation and have not taken the time to hang any art. They’ve been too consumed with Derneburg.

In addition to scrapping a show of Baselitz and his contemporaries’ early works, the Halls stopped a shipment of about 140 of their Warhols headed for Derneburg’s official opening, since the law applies to foreign-born artists as well, and to whole collections judged significant. Despite verbal assurances from government officials that their art would be allowed out, Andy says the law was so murky that his lawyers could not allay the couple’s fears. “I just don’t want to be the guinea pig,” he says. “It’s not a risk I’m prepared to take with hundreds of millions of dollars’ worth of art.”

Since then, the Halls have scrambled to reprogramme the 70,000 sq ft of exhibition space in their museum, coming up with an inaugural list of seven shows. With more than 5,000 works in their private collection and another 100 in their foundation to draw on, as Christine puts it, “we have enough art.” Opening on July 1 will be five monographic exhibitions of living artists who are free to exempt themselves from the law: Antony Gormley, Malcolm Morley, Barry Le Va, Hermann Nitsch and Julian Schnabel.



Schloss Derneburg, south of Hanover, Germany © Hall Art Foundation

Joining them will be two group shows that feature works the Halls have deemed safe from the law's reach. The first, *Für Barbara*, is a compendium of more than 90 artworks by women that comprise an ode to the late Berlin dealer Barbara Weiss, curated by her stepson, gallerist Leo Koenig. Weiss, who was a staunch champion of female artists, gently goaded the Halls to buy more art by women. "Let's buy it for Barbara," became a mantra, Andy says, when they were on the fence about a piece by a female artist. Now, roughly 20 per cent of the artists in the collection are women, including Carmen Herrera, Barbara Kruger and Judith Bernstein.

Andy conceived of the second thematic show, focusing on the moving image, with works by artists such as Tony Oursler and Omer Fast, as a way to outsmart the new law: exhibition videos are frequently copies, so if one were to be confiscated, it would hardly be a catastrophe. "That was my initial, genius, inspired idea," Andy says with a smile. Andy tapped Chrissie Iles, a well-regarded curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, to organise the exhibition.

The Gormley show will be the artist's largest retrospective in Germany to date and will include works on paper as well as monumental outdoor sculpture. "They're fearless," Gormley says of the Halls. The sculptor, who curated the show, says the couple managed to turn an "obstacle into an opportunity . . . The law was a pretty serious undermining of their plans, but Andy and Christine quickly regrouped."

Although the Halls had long acquired art, they stepped up the pace substantially about 15 years ago in response to a mild midlife crisis. "I thought that rather than burnishing my bank account, maybe

I should be doing something interesting with the money I was earning,” says Andy. “We’re talking about buying hundreds of artworks a year as opposed to one or two. Right from the get-go, I thought, ‘There’s no point in buying art just to put in a warehouse.’ It was in the back of my mind that we would exhibit art to the public.”

In addition to Derneburg, the couple have turned their Vermont farm into an exhibition space open by appointment from May to November. One of this summer’s shows, *Hope and Hazard: A Comedy of Eros*, was curated by Eric Fischl, an American artist whose angst-ridden figurative work the Halls collect. Trawling the Halls’ collection, Fischl found a pronounced through-line.

“It’s very physical stuff — a lot of expressive, gestural work and very much involved with the body and with sexuality,” says Fischl, who is himself known for his sensual nudes and has even painted Andy and Christine in the buff. He was floored by the hundreds of artists represented. “What surprised me was how few artists I knew.”

The Hall Foundation also has an unconventional relationship with the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, born from another legal tussle. The Halls had installed a massive concrete sculpture by Anselm Kiefer on their front lawn in Connecticut. The local historical commission deemed the piece a structure, requiring its permission, which it was not keen on giving. A court battle ensued, and the Halls lost.

Shortly thereafter, Joseph C Thompson, director of Mass MoCA, paid a fundraising visit to the Halls and, he recalls, “walking out, I expressed admiration for the sculpture”. The following week, Andy called and offered the museum the work. Since Mass MoCA is not a collecting institution, Thompson declined and says he explained, “That one work, while beautiful, does not constitute an exhibition.” A day or two later, he received a binder of Kiefer images from the Hall collection, along with a note from Andy: “See if you can constitute an exhibition out of this.”

In the end, the Hall Foundation agreed to overhaul an abandoned structure on the [Mass MoCA campus](#), pay the operating costs and make a 15-year renewable loan of the Kiefer art. It’s a collaboration, Andy says, that he could envision expanding with more Kiefer works currently on view at the NSU Art Museum in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

A sophisticated observer of markets, Andy seeks out undervalued artists — Morley, an American painter of hyper-realistic cinematic images, is one — and buys deep. He is not naive about the impact his collecting habits can have on the art market. “I would like to think we were a factor in White Cube taking on Kiefer and Baselitz,” he says of the London gallery, which first made its name

promoting the Young British Artists, not ageing German ones.



'Medieval Divided Self' (2016) by Malcolm Morley

The Halls' tastes have expanded from German expressionism to minimalism and conceptual art. They are, for instance, well on their way to acquiring one of every multiple Joseph Beuys created; they own about 550 of 650 made. "It's just a question of me getting the energy to go out and track down the remaining ones," Andy says.

Although their daughter Emma is involved and their daughter-in-law, Maryse Brand, is the foundation's director, Andy gets a creative jolt from assembling the collection. Says Christine, who has seemed content to let her husband do most of the talking, "No one advises him."

hallartfoundation.org

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