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# A CONVE

## with the HOWARDS

Kit and Robert Howard share their unbridled enthusiasm for art. *By Eric Christopher Cohler*

*Photography by Francis Smith*



# CONVERSATION



A piece from 2008, *Temptation no.22, Beauty*, by Chen Jiagang has a perfect setting in the home's gracious living room.



A 2007 C-print by Chinese photographer Miao Xiaochun, *Stand*, hangs in the study.

Certain collectors are born as such and others “shaped,” both however share an indelible trait—passion and unbridled enthusiasm for art in all mediums. Kit and Robert (Bob) Howard are hybrid collectors forming a quintessential union between nature and nurture. Bob, a consummate entrepreneur and inventor, was born with collecting in his DNA while Kit came to collecting during her early years in asset management. For Bob it was pocket watches that caught his eye, assembling one of the largest private collections of timepieces. Kit’s first foray into collecting was through the acquisition of small paintings and works on paper. She began, as many young collectors do, in a slow concerted way, and now, along with Bob, has turned this genesis of a collection in a magnificent mix of some of the best artists, photographers and sculptors of our time.

**Eric Cohler:** Kit, not only would your collection be the envy of many museums, it’s incredibly well curated and comprehensive, especially in the area of photography.

**Kit Howard:** I’m sure that Bob and I never started out to build such a comprehensive collection, it just took off. In fact, except for one painting years ago, we have never deaccessioned anything. Our core collection includes works by Thomas Struth, David Salle, Lorna Simpson, Jennifer Bartlett...

**Bob Howard:** ...And Lichtenstein, Rauschenberg, and Rosenquist.

**EC:** You’ve managed to stay focused and interested in your original acquisitions while many collectors merely keep one or two of their first purchases, generally moving on as their taste develops. Obviously you and Bob were confident enough to take the plunge in the first place. And your core collection is

impressive. That’s a lot of talent concentrated in your homes.

**BH:** I think that I speak for both of us when I say we’ve almost never regretted a purchase.

**KH:** Agreed. And between our country house and city apartment we’ve managed to hang or display virtually every piece in our collection. I always joke with Bob that one day we may build an addition just for art.

**EC:** In other words, a private gallery.

**BH:** Yes, but one that’s open to friends and family, filled with life and energy.

**EC:** Art is never static and if it is I don’t consider it art. I admit that I’m prejudiced when it comes to world-class art. Speaking of which, could you spontaneously name three of your favorite museums?

**BH:** The Met here in New York; the Tate in London...



In the kitchen, at left is a unique piece by photographer Kathryn Howard, 2007. At center, seen in the entryway, is a 2002 Bart Michiels, titled *Poitiers 732*.

**KH:** ...And the Beyeler in Basel.

**EC:** Would you store pieces if there wasn't room to hang or display them?

**KH:** We'd probably never store art. If we don't have the space I'm not that interested in buying something simply to put it away. Bob and I love living with art; we like to see it front and center.

**EC:** I realize that you're running out of wall space, but that notwithstanding are you still collecting?

**KH:** Yes, although in a more limited way. In the past few years we've added two sculptures, and we're always interested in what's new among artists in our collection as well as discovering others.

**EC:** Were there pieces that "got away" and you later wish that you'd stretched to make the purchase?

**BH:** Seldom, however, there was a Magritte that Kit was mad for and we didn't bite.

**KH:** I'd love to add a Magritte to our collection but the prices are now stratospheric.

**BH:** When we began collecting the prices were a fraction of what they are today, although it seemed like a fortune to us at the time.

**KH:** It was.

**EC:** I feel that it's the same for many young collectors whenever they begin collecting. While in my early 20s, I could have acquired a Cindy Sherman film still for under \$5,000. Problem was I didn't have a thousand dollars let alone \$5.

**KH:** Completely understood. We could have bought Sherman's #96, *Orange Shirt, Tile Floor* years ago, unfortunately, she remains a photographer we didn't add to the collection when we should have.

**EC:** Who knew? We both obviously loved her work but it somehow escaped us.

**BH:** True, and as our children and grandchildren also are interested in art, Kit and I have helped give them a leg up whenever possible. Our birthday present to them is usually art.

**EC:** The next generation of great collectors is emerging. This is becoming a classic tale of nature and nurture working synergistically.

**KH:** We encourage them all to collect. I manage private equity and I firmly believe in art as a hard asset; it's an investment.

**EC:** Are you saying purely so?

**KH:** No. You of course should buy something that you want to live with, however try to make that acquisition with an eye toward appreciation. We had art consultants help with our first major purchases, and I would



A C-print by Dionisio Gonzalez, *Nova Acqua Gasosa II* (2008), hangs above the living room hearth.



The Liu Bolin photo at center, *Hiding in the City No. 65 - Telephone Booth*, is from 2008. The steel sculpture at right is a 1995 piece by Joel Graesser.



Collectors Robert and Kit Howard. At right is a piece by Daniel and Geo Fuchs from their extensive series on toys.



A 2008 painted steel sculpture by Nova Mihai Popa, titled *Blue Aurora*, welcomes visitors. The artist was a longtime resident of the Hamptons.



Looking down the hall, *Three Wood Panels*, a piece by Paolo Masi hangs at right. A 2001 mixed-media piece by Lorna Simpson, *Untitled (on a Cuban Bus)*, hangs at center. A wall-mounted sculpture at left by Carole Aoki completes the setting.

recommend that when spending whatever “you” think is a lot of money that you do the same. We are now at the point where we don’t work with consultants but they proved invaluable during our formative years.

**EC:** Fascinating, Kit. I’m usually preaching that art is for art’s sake and should only be purchased for love of the piece; forget about an investment. If it happens to appreciate, that’s a bonus. Perhaps you’ve answered the question of why I have so many works squirreled away in closets, storerooms and under my bed while you have all of yours on display at home or in a museum.

**BH:** I’m somewhere between the two positions

on art as an investment or purely an aesthetic purchase.

**EC:** Speaking of positions, your country house is beautifully sited. The mid-century modern interiors are the perfect foil for your art.

**KH:** We had the good fortune to collaborate with the architect James Merrell on the renovation and addition to our house. The interiors were designed by Pepe Lopez.

**EC:** Well done all. Is there anything else that either of you would like to add in closing?

**KH:** Bob and I feel strongly that art is able to transcend time and place taking the viewer to another plane, another world. Conversely,

when wearing my financial “hat,” art is akin to a precious commodity and this shouldn’t be overlooked when making an investment. ●



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