

# COLLECTOR PROFILE

An interview with art collector Joe DiMartino in his New York City apartment



**MG:** When and how did you start collecting art?

**JD:** I started collecting in my early twenties. I focused initially on mid-20<sup>th</sup> century photography, mostly established US and European photographers, including Helen Levitt, Garry Winogrand, William Eggleston, and László Moholy-Nagy.

While my parents weren't particularly interested in collecting art for themselves, they provided my sister and me with extraordinary exposure and encouragement with respect to art and art collecting. I was fortunate enough to have access to John Szarkowski, who was a friend of my father's, and several of the people who worked with him at MoMA.

**MG:** How have your collecting goals, or tastes, changed since then?

**JD:** What did Oscar Wilde say about taste – "good taste is the excuse I've always given for leading such a bad life"? My tastes are fluid and tend to be cyclical (I'm now old enough to recognize cycles). There are many pieces that I became tired of and put away, in a sort of recycling process.

I look for images that challenge me, that trap my senses. For me, it's not an intellectual or a speculative exercise which views art as an asset class. I am only obliquely concerned with the second order proposition of the market and the concept of economic value.

I think within this approach there is an underlying logic; threads that run through the collection, however disparate the media. Maybe I'm black-hearted, but I do respond to darkness more than beauty. In particular, I tend to be drawn to seemingly everyday images which have a subtle dark or foreboding character. It seems to me that the best works of art have some evidence of humanity (whether there is a person in the frame or not).

Artists take risks and push conventional limits; in keeping with that spirit, I try to take gambles in my collecting. Of course they don't always work out: in retrospect I realize that I have made the occasional bizarre choice along the way. But wisdom and refinement come through these mistakes.

**MG:** Why is it important for you to collect art?

**JD:** It fills an existential void in my soul. That and the galleries have good-looking girls.

But seriously, collecting art is about gaining exposure to a variety of art forms and should not necessarily be about possession. It's the process of looking at art in a focused way over a lifetime that's of value, not your ultimate inventory. I see each work as an expression of a significant and unique personal vision. It's the exposure to these visions, whether you end up acquiring the piece or not, that is the point for me.

**MG:** Do you have a preference for how you collect – for example, at galleries, auctions, or art fairs?

**JD:** I like developing relationships with a core group of galleries and I have increasingly been going to the auctions. I like the organic nature of the auction, the possibility for arbitrage. I see auctions as partly about the art and partly as interesting sociological phenomena.

My process of collecting tends to be non-linear. There are long stretches of time, sometimes years, when I won't really acquire anything and then spikes of activity – including the first half of this year – where I'll purchase clusters of work.

**MG:** This piece by A.A. Rucci – your first purchase of a painting – is a departure from your predominantly photography-based collection. How did you make this change, and what was it about this painting that appealed to you?

**JD:** I walked into the office at Mixed Greens and the Rucci was hard to miss. It was graphic and bold and I loved the gold bird, which added a layer of dimensionality.

I look for works of intelligence and thorough technical skill (mechanical and compositional) allied to a deep sense of the natural world that expresses itself in a coherent union of form and content. The Rucci exhibits these characteristics in a direct way.

**MG:** Will you continue to acquire paintings? Are you considering other mediums to add to your collection?

**JD:** I currently have a bias toward paintings. That said, I tend to be drawn to the image first, not the medium, so it will be opportunistic. Lately I have also been focused on video based art (which my friend Lisa Frazar introduced me to) which I really enjoy and find elicits strong responses from in my friends.

**MG:** How does your art collection reflect you?

**JD:** I think we can understand an individual better through their affinities. My collection reflects my personality especially because with few exceptions I buy what I like and do not use an advisor or consultant.

**MG:** Could you compare art collecting to anything else?

**JD:** Well, I think art collecting lends itself to a number of analogies depending on your orientation and your approach. Certainly, it could be compared to a relationship: an initial visceral reaction, and then coming to understand an object over time from multiple angles, different contexts, environments and internal perspectives.

Lately, I think the art market and collecting environment can be compared to the capital markets (unfortunately and unsustainably). The current trend in collecting seems to be primarily on social and investment potential. Owning "Art" has become the central status signifier in the new global social order. People are measuring their social value by their collection. I think collecting art is an exercise whereby if you keep score, you lose.