



Collector Blake Byrne with one of the first pieces he acquired, Martin Disler's *Untitled*, 1987. Opposite page, from left: The living room in Byrne's Hollywood Hills home currently features Barkley Hendricks's *North Philly Niggah* (William Corbett), 1975; the bone and hair sculpture *Le Poil de la bête 2*, 2010, by Théo Mercier, one of Byrne's current favorite young artists; Tom LaDuke's oil-on-canvas *Surrender*, 2012, above the fireplace; Joshua Levine's *Sour Diesel*, 2008, on the hearth; and on the coffee table, Barbara Lekberg's *Soul Clap Hands*, ca. 1964.

OUTSIDE THE BOX

Blake Byrne built his collection by going his own way, and the results have helped alter the paths of institutions and artists alike.

BY MICHAEL SLENSKE / PHOTOGRAPHS BY NOAH WEBB



Last June in Basel a fellow collector approached Blake Byrne and asked if he didn't have an early Martin Disler sculpture. "When I said, 'Yes,' he shook his head and said, 'Man they are rare as hens' teeth,'" recalls Byrne with a laugh. "The truth is, nobody has really talked about Disler since I've been collecting. I just happened to like that piece."

Perhaps because he came to collecting relatively late in life, Byrne says he has never had a particular goal in mind, he simply acquires what he likes. When pressed for a guiding philosophy, he says that the coincidence in timing between his coming out as a gay man and his early collecting made him "more receptive to tough pieces." Sitting in in his Hollywood Hills home just a few days after his 80th birthday, Byrne pauses before offering one principle: "I don't collect namby-pamby art."

Three decades ago, Byrne was a broadcasting executive living in New York City with his then wife. The only art they owned was "some travel art and a few pieces made by



Works by artists who live in Los Angeles are especially well represented in Byrne's collection. Three such pieces: Richard Hawkins's *Disembodied Zombie Skeet Pink*, 1997; an untitled 2010 sculpture by Tim Hawkinson; and Alexander Kroll's *Flashe*, acrylic, and spray paint on canvas *The Winter Ceiling*, 2014.



neighbors and friends," he says. Then his fraternity brother, the late collector and philanthropist Peter Fischer, stepped in. "We'd go over for dinners at his house, and they had all this art on the walls; in our place all we had were posters of the Eiffel Tower and Pont Neuf that we'd bought on our honeymoon," remembers Byrne.

Fischer introduced Byrne to the Sculpture Center—located on East 69th Street at the time—and under his friend's guidance, Byrne started collecting bronzes by New York sculptors such as Barbara Lekberg. (One of Lekberg's pieces still sits on the coffee table in his light-flooded Minimalist perch overlooking West L.A.) After Byrne divorced in 1985—he came out in the early 1990s—he would pop into galleries like Marian Goodman and Jack Tilton on his lunch hour, and he got to know Tilton a bit.

"I told him that I'd really like to start collecting art, but I didn't even know what I liked," says Byrne. "Tilton suggested that I go to Art Basel, walk around, write down the names of the artists I liked. Then, he said, 'We'll take it from there.'"

LEFT: MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, LOS ANGELES

Byrne flew to Switzerland for the 1988 fair with a budget of \$60,000, visited "every damn booth" over the course of three days, and then presented a list of 70 artists to Tilton. "We got it down to 30 or 40 pieces, and he said, 'I think you could start with any of these,'" says Byrne. "In those days there wasn't everybody crashing through the gates at 11 o'clock on Tuesday morning, buying out the place before you turned around, so I went back and bought six pieces. That was the beginning of the collection. After I got those first six, I was bitten."

His selections now seem prescient. Apart from the earlier bronzes, Byrne's collection began that June in Basel with a six-foot-tall plaster Martin Disler statue from 1987 that stands in the foyer of his home; a Piero Pizzi Cannella diptych now owned by his son; a Mario Merz drawing that he "regrettably"

sold; a Juan Muñoz sculpture that is promised to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, where Byrne has been a trustee since 1999; a large Richard Tuttle sculpture made from garbage bags, also promised to MOCA; and an untitled steel-and-cement wall sculpture by Cristina Iglesias that is currently in the downstairs hall by Byrne's bedroom.

By 1989 Byrne had moved to L.A., and on his second trip to Basel, he started collecting Marlene Dumas—works on paper first, though he ultimately acquired such iconic paintings as *Thumbsucker*, 1994, and *The Woman of Algiers*, 2001, which were crucial to the artist's midcareer survey at MOCA and New York's Museum of Modern Art in 2008 and 2009.

"Marlene was pivotal for me because the work was so full of emotion," says Byrne. "I joke to my kids that when I stop





talking to my art, that's when they'll know I have Alzheimer's, and I think Marlene offers a great example, you can really talk to her art." What has spoken to Byrne in the years since is anything but typical. In the early 1990s, he purchased Gordon Matta-Clark's floor cutout *Office Baroque*, 1977, during a trip to Paris, where he took a flat in 1997. His frequent jaunts to France over the past two decades led to a deep appreciation for emerging and established European artists, including Muñoz, Michaël Borremans, Martin Kippenberger, Steve McQueen, and Albert Oehlen.

As the collection outgrew available space in his home, Byrne began to think of it in broader terms, still making purchases on the basis of personal connection, but looking at ways the works could be put to use. In 1995, after retiring from broadcasting, he founded the Skylark Foundation, a nonprofit that includes arts education funding among its portfolio of institutional grants promoting social justice and diversity.

By the time his 70th birthday rolled around in 2005, Byrne's vision resulted in a landmark, 123-work donation to MOCA, still the largest gift to the institution by a single

donor. Curators Ann Goldstein and Michael Darling organized an exhibition of the donated works.

Paul Schimmel, the former chief curator of MOCA who selected the works for the gift and is currently principal at the soon-to-open L.A. gallery Hauser Wirth & Schimmel, argues that Byrne "built a remarkably advanced collection by looking for intellectual, spiritual, and conceptual value rather than sitting back and trying to cherry-pick the best work as defined by the consensus." The curator and the collector first met in the mid 1990s during a lunch at the Beverly Hills Tennis Club with Angeleno collector and MOCA trustee Bea Gersh, who served as an early inspiration for Byrne's philanthropic collecting style. Byrne had just donated his first work to MOCA: Tony Cragg's *Branchiopods*, 1987. "I think Blake is one of these exceptional collectors who, to some degree, are only restricted by cost," adds Schimmel. "He never went out to build a trophy collection, but instead wanted to be groundbreaking."

The 2005 gift included key works like the Matta-Clark cutout and the seminal McQueen video installation *Drumroll*, 1998, but also a panoply of artists working locally. "What really touched me then, and remains now in reflection," says Goldstein, "is that he made his gift not only to support the museum and the community, but also to support the artists. That care for the artists has always been at the root of his passion and compass as a collector." In L.A.,

Humor colors many of the works in the collection, whether their subject matter alludes to art history or darker themes. Opposite: In the living room, opposite, Jason Meadows's *AK Gothic* from 2008 looms over Alexander Calder's *Perforated Black Boomerang on Red*, ca. 1947. Sherrile Levine's 2001 brass sculpture *Une Pipe: I*, is based on a Magritte painting. After Byrne acquired the unicorn sculpture by Marnie Weber, the artist made a special C-print for the collector; they now form a tableau in the guest bedroom. The portrait *Blake*, 2005, is by John Sonsini, who is best known for his portraits of immigrant day laborers.

TOP LEFT: COLLECTION OF BLAKE BYRNE



Byrne had been acquiring, and then promised to MOCA, early works from the likes of John Baldessari, Kim Dingle, Thomas Houseago, Jim Shaw, Paul McCarthy (including documentary photographs of his 1972 performance *Face Painting—Floor, White Line*), and Mike Kelley (notably two ship sculptures worn on the artist's feet during his 1979 performance *The Monitor and the Merrimac*).

"That was one of the first pieces I bought," recalls Byrne. "I was at Rosamund Felsen's, and she showed me a work on paper by Kelley, and it was a great work, but it was a couple fucking through a star constellation and I didn't think I should come home with something like that with my kids. I was timid back then. Then she pulled out these little boats. Mike gave me photographs to go with them when I made the gift."

Ten years after the MOCA gift, Byrne is marking his most recent birthday by sending more than 75 works from the collection on tour in a traveling exhibition titled "Open This End," after the 1962 Warhol painting Byrne acquired at an auction at Christie's in the early 1990s. The exhibition, prepared under the direction of Skylark Foundation executive director Barbara Schwan and curated by Joseph R. Wolin, debuted at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Byrne's alma mater, this spring. After its current stop at Ohio State University Urban Arts Space, next year the show moves on to the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University and the Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. At each school the collection will be tied in to art history and drawing classes, but this is no mere

teaching collection. Notable works include David Hammons's *Money Tree*, Felix Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled (Last Light)*, 1983, Glenn Ligon's *Study for Negro Sunshine II #11*, 2011, Kehinde Wiley's bust *Adeyale*, 2010, and Dumas's Osama bin Laden portrait, *The Pilgrim*, 2006.

The curator is particularly fond of the cross conversations and image interplay between a sexualized 1988 Kippenberger self-portrait; Sherrie Levine's polished bronze homage to Magritte, *Une Pipe: 1*, 2001; and a 1999 Cindy Sherman photo of mutilated doll parts, as well as the formal connections linking Jack Pierson's *Nothing*, 1992, and Warhol's *Open This End*. "All of the threads can be traced back to that Warhol painting, which is very much related to text art, Conceptual art, and has this sort of performative aspect," says Wolin.

Byrne says the impulses to collect, donate, and teach come from his father, who was a professor for many years. "As a manager, I've always been a teacher. I enjoy trying to educate," says Byrne, noting that part of his legacy in teaching through art is the lesson that anyone can amass an avant-garde collection. "I could never have bought the collection off my wages, and often I have had to sell one work to buy another. I think I've paid more than \$100,000 for only 15 or 20 pieces, but I love helping young and emerging artists."

Unlike the new raft of art flippers and speculators who buy out the entire studios of young artists in hopes they'll realize exponential returns on their investment, Byrne tried to avoid buying more than one work at a time and never bought any artist's works en masse. (From a financial perspective, Byrne admits, "That was probably stupid.") He shied away from even meeting artists until he was "committed" to their work, and even then, he associated closely with only a special few, including Muñoz, Dumas, and Rita McBride.

"In one sense the flipping drives you crazy because there's

so much manipulation going on," Byrne says.

"I think the whole concept of that sucks, and it's really terrible for the artists. If I were starting today, everybody would talk to me about the investment, and then you're going about it for another reason."

Goldstein recognizes the significance of Byrne's decision to place passion ahead of profit. "I think of Blake as a true philanthropist at heart, someone who is passionately committed to giving back," says Goldstein. "His collecting grows from his passions, interests in European art, emerging artists, and key figures of our time. He made many daring and inspired choices, including acquiring works of a scale or medium he could not possibly accommodate at home."

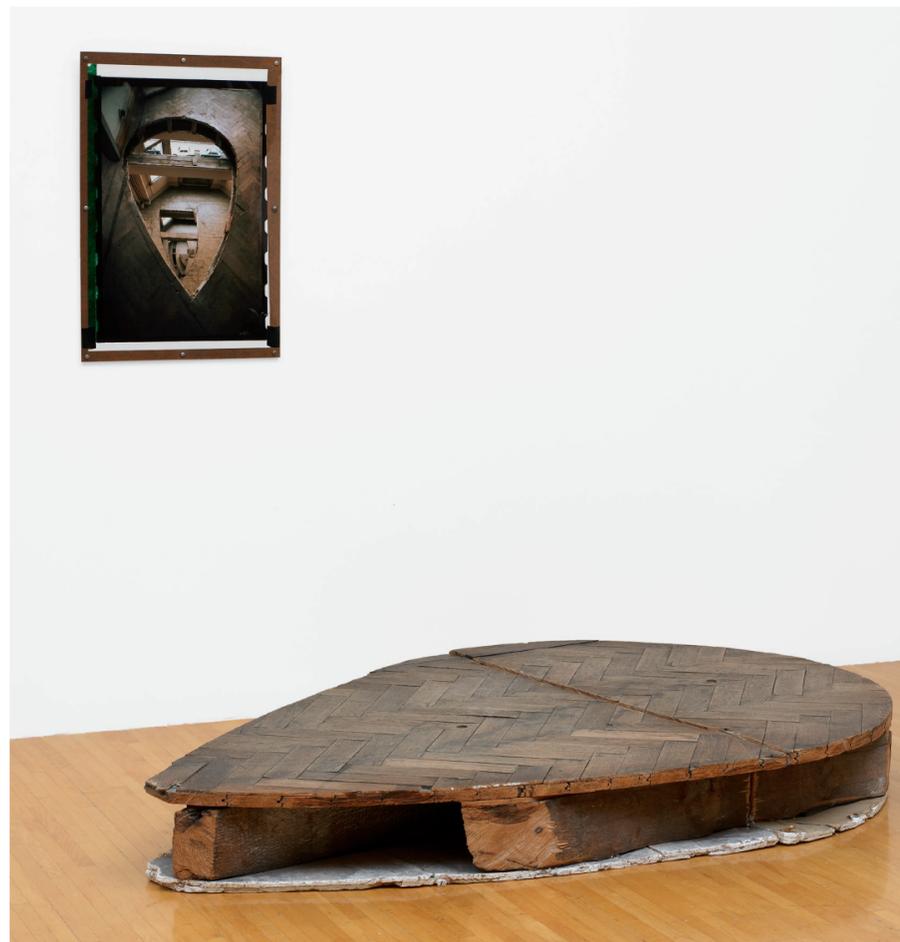
Despite the gifts (in addition to MOCA, the Nasher has received several notable donations over the years) and the touring show, Byrne's hilltop home is packed with art, including a number of recent purchases. He likes to keep his works in constant rotation so "they're always talking to me," he says, and to each other, even as they compete with stunning views from nearly every room. At the moment in his living room, Tom LaDuke's *Surrender*, 2012, hangs over a fireplace, flanked on the right by Jason Meadows's *AK Gothic*, 2008, and on the left by a 2010 hairy sculpture by Théo Mercier—his favorite young artist from Paris—lording over a small sculpture of a bug-eyed Chihuahua by Joshua Levine. Across the room is a David Smith bronze atop a black grand piano and a portrait of Byrne painted a decade ago by John Sonsini.

Down the stairs are nine haunting works by Belgian painter Jan De Maesschalck, eight of which Byrne showed last year at the Phoenix Art Museum, where his mother was once a docent. They keep company with a Joan Mitchell, an early Jackson Pollock crayon work on paper, and Richard Tuttle's *Santa Fe II*, yeark, as well as party favors from Byrne's 60th, 70th, 75th, and 80th birthdays made by McBride, Iva Gueorguieva, and other friends. In the guest bedroom things get surreal, with Marnie Weber's unicorn mannequin from 2005 complemented by a unicorn photo she made as a gift for Byrne a couple years later. Betye Saar's *Objects, Obsessions, Obligations*, 2013, and Dan Bayles's mixed-media painting of the rec center at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad keep the visual play in the master bedroom just as heady.

The action in the family room is likewise intense, with Jim Shaw's two-part painting *Cake (Blake)*, 2011, facing a goose-feather-and-billiard-ball sculpture by Abraham Cruzvillegas, while a Jason Rhoades paint-bucket-and-halogen-light installation puts off a harsh fluorescence beside a cushy sofa overlooking the pool.

"I call it *Male/Female*," says Byrne, flashing a cheeky grin. "Is that the official title?" asks Schwan, picking up a checklist off the coffee table just below a menacing Tam van Tran's ceramic sculpture. "I don't know, that's what I call it," says Byrne. "It's actually called *Light/Inner Light*," Schwan confirms. Byrne lets loose his infectious laugh and everyone in the room joins in. ☐

Sculpture has been a strength of Byrne's holdings from the very beginning. Among the works included in the collector's 2005 gift to MOCA, still the largest single donation in the museum's history, were Mike Kelley's *The Monitor and the Merrimac*, 1979, and Gordon Matta-Clark's *Office Baroque*, 1977. Mel Kendrick's untitled bronze from around 1985 stands on Byrne's terrace.



THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT: MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, LOST ANGELES