

# of ARTISTS & REPERTOIRES

HAVING CAUGHT THE COLLECTING BUG, LOS ANGELES RECORD EXECUTIVE JOHN RUBELI NOW APPLIES HIS SKILLS ON BEHALF OF NEW AND EMERGING ARTISTS BY MICHAEL SLENSKE PHOTOGRAPHS BY NOAH WEBB





John Rubeli, framed, before Alex Olson's *Joelle's Wall*, 2013, an interactive mural on which other paintings may be pinned, installed in the bedroom of the collector's daughter.

“I’m not a big game hunter, so I don’t have a pink unicorn on the wall,” John Rubeli warns me before I drive over to the 1956 ranch house he has shared with his wife, Stacy, for the past six years. The 2,500-square-foot home, in Sherman Oaks, California, was built by an aerospace engineer who sold it to the Rubelis not long before Stacy, a former director at Regen Projects, became pregnant with the first of their two children. (Rubeli also has two older daughters from a previous marriage.) The couple painted the exterior field gray and added some new appliances, landscaping, and high-wattage accent colors, but otherwise the house remains a simple study in midcentury functionality and cool California minimalism. It is by all accounts—and Rubeli’s own admission—a modest affair. The art collection inside, however, is anything but.

The collection began with a stack of late 1980s drawings by Raymond Pettibon, whose work Rubeli identified from old Black Flag fliers and purchased for \$300 or \$400 each from Richard Heller Gallery in 1990, just as his own music industry career was getting started. Since then it has grown to include nearly 400 works. Diving deep into the L.A. scene,

the holdings now clearly demonstrate the collector’s ability to identify and support talent before it becomes a market sensation—something he did for 12 years as an artist and repertoire man for Atlantic Records.

“When you’re in the [music] scene, it’s about the clothes, ephemera, objects. So, to me, to go to the source of these punk fliers and have an actual piece of art was appealing,” says Rubeli of those gateway drawings. The roots of the collector’s ethos, however, begin with his upbringing in Phoenix.

As a teen, flipping through the stacks at record stores and going to concerts connected him to the creative drive, but always from the standpoint of the observer. “I’m not an artist. I guess I’m a professional fan, if anything,” he says. A product of Catholic schools, Rubeli says he received his education in fandom from a local guitarist and record store employee who exposed him to bands like Love and Rockets and the Misfits. Rubeli saw shows by Bad Religion (with which he later worked on two albums), Guns N’ Roses, and Mötley Crüe at tiny clubs long before they climbed the charts.

While a student at Marquette University in Wisconsin, he booked acts such as Nirvana and Nine Inch Nails for shows at a Milwaukee club called the Lunch Room. Whenever possible, he went to Chicago to see bands at the famed Cabaret Metro. “I would hang out at the Art Institute, which is where I first





caught my art bug,” he says, recalling his recognition of Gerhard Richter’s 1983 painting *Kerze* (“Candle”) from the cover of Sonic Youth’s *Daydream Nation*.

After finishing Marquette, Rubeli moved to Los Angeles. He bounced around from the agent-training program at William Morris to being a music manager and one of the original organizers of the Lollapalooza festival before landing his A&R gig at Atlantic.

For years after that initial Pettibon purchase, Rubeli collected street art and posters, eventually acquiring those by the likes of Banksy, KAWS, and Mark Ryden. Then he came across Sharon Lockhart’s 1996 photograph *Untitled (Girl on Table)* at the Whitney Biennial during a trip to New York in 1997. “I don’t like to define the what, where, why,” says Rubeli. “I just know how I feel when I’m around art, and the feeling I had in front of this piece was the feeling I had going into a record store.”

Back in L.A., Rubeli headed over to Lockhart’s gallery representative, Blum & Poe. He recognized Jeffrey Poe as a member of the L.A. band Blissed Out Fatalists. “It was that magic moment,” says Rubeli. While the edition of that particular Lockhart image was sold out, his visit kick-started a bigger relationship with gallerists, who took the place of that old record store clerk from the mall.

“I remember John coming by the gallery in Santa Monica inquiring about that Sharon Lockhart piece,” recalls Tim



Above, an Olson painting hangs to the left of the orange hearth, on which Mary Heilmann’s *Last Chance for Gas*, 2005, is displayed. Liz Glynn’s *Untitled VI (black box lighting fixture)*, 2012, hovers above Dashiell Manley’s *Elegy for Whatever 5*, 2016, adjacent to Rosha Yaghmai’s sculpture *Optometer, Manhole*, 2015, and Kaari Upson’s *M.B. (Queen)*, 2013. In another corner, left, Fredrik Værsløv’s *Untitled (Der König des Waldes)*, 2012, is the backdrop for Elliott Hundley’s *Swarming Over*, 2011. Opposite, from left: Matthew Monahan’s *Waiting for Use*, 1994/2005, shares a wall with the Værsløv, as Ann Cathrin November Høibo’s *Untitled (Light Blue)*, 2014, and Lisa Williamson’s *Round Out Rubber Holes*, 2015, take significant places in the art room.



Blum. “He was very exuberant about what he might be able to gain from art in general. It was a very pure engagement, unfettered by any noise surrounding the contemporary art world, and that was very refreshing.”

It’s also refreshing to most artists, gallerists, and curators who know Rubeli. His approach is still an expression of his willingness to support emerging talent where others might not see it. He began collecting seriously in 1997, using his “evil-empire money” and “robinhooding it” to visual artists. Meeting artists at art schools or at concerts eventually prompted him to support more than three dozen museum shows, beginning with Matthew Monahan’s 2007 MOCA Focus exhibition at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, and continuing with shows at MCA Chicago, MCA Santa Barbara, New York’s Museum of Modern Art, SFMOMA, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, REDCAT, and the Hammer Museum, where Rubeli has been on the board of overseers for two years.

The museum’s “Made in L.A.” biennial exhibition, the third edition of which opens June 12, allows Rubeli to discover “the parts of the diverse, multigenerational L.A. art community that are unfamiliar,” he says. “Even though the show provides a small snapshot of each given moment, it has proven to be

an exciting, engaging overview that not only speaks to a moment, but enables consideration over time.”

“John is the best combination of being old-school—he really does his research, he loves artists, he spends time in the studio, and he sees everything,” says Connie Butler, chief curator at the Hammer. “But he’s also from a younger generation and is conversant in all media. To me, he is what you look for in that next generation of collectors, those younger people who are going to be the important people of tomorrow.”

After that early Whitney Biennial experience, Rubeli bought some other Lockharts and early Elizabeth Peyton portraits, but he “then shifted to more abstract work, things that reminded me of listening to My Bloody Valentine or early Sonic Youth records where there are layers of distortion, atmosphere, and gauze,” he says.

Seated in a Mary Heilmann–designed club chair in the family’s art room, Rubeli proves that very point. In most homes, this would be the living room, but in the Rubeli abode it serves as a sort of micro museum for their most precarious and challenging works. On display at the moment are a set of three painted Betty Woodman vases that Rubeli secured from some Phoenix collectors as an anniversary present for Stacy, who studied under Woodman at the University of Colorado.

Tough ceramics abound near the hearth, which is painted orange to match Heilmann's *Last Chance for Gas*, 2005, currently Rubeli's favorite piece in the collection, which also includes a Beatrice Wood statuette of a couple from 1956 and ceramic casts of gasoline canisters by Matthias Merkle Hess. Hanging from the ceiling is a partially destroyed plaster, resin, acrylic, and enamel chandelier from the Black Box event space that Liz Glynn designed for the Pacific Standard Time Performance and Public Art Festival in 2012. It is suspended over *M.B. (Queen)*, 2013, Kaari Upson's pigment-dyed silicone rendering of a found mattress.

Across from the fireplace is a vintage Sony Trinitron television showing looped video works by Dashiell Manley, which play opposite the first of the artist's recent pastel impasto paintings (a gift for Stacy's 40th birthday, which she calls "the first work I've wanted to own in years"). Nearby are a selection of small carved figures and bowls by Alma Allen, representing the last works the Joshua Tree-based sculptor carved by hand before his wrists gave out to carpal tunnel syndrome.

"Their belief in artists fuels a lot of what they do," says Shaun Caley Regen, Stacy's old boss and the founder of Regen Projects. "But I was especially happy when, with a newborn daughter, they purchased a beautiful floor sculpture by Elliott Hundley. I thought, 'Wow! That is brave.'"

A child-proofer's worst nightmare, the piece, *Swarming Over*, 2011, is a wild concoction of wood, plastic, glass, wire, pins, found lanterns, metal, plaster, cement, string, shell, paper, canvas, marble, and found tapestry. It sits in a corner near Glynn's *On the Museum's Ruin (Morris Hunt-Corbusier-Piano)*, 2011, a nonfunctional reinvention of

“What you're doing by acquiring somebody's work is making a commitment to them as an artist, their ideas, their practice. The object in a lot of ways is the least concern I have in building a collection.”



Clockwise from above left: Ceramics from 2015 by Sylvie Auvray sit on a windowsill; Neil Raitt's *Kaleidoscope Mountain*, 2015, hangs in the dining room; and Dianna Molzan's *Untitled*, 2013, and Glenn Ligon's *Untitled (I live on my shadow)*, 2009, gather around a console Steinway. Opposite: *Yes and Not*, 2006, by Tauba Auerbach, and *Windmill-Trustworthy Off Horizons #186*, 2013, by Haegue Yang, surround a bookcase in the media room. On the shelves are tucked a variety of works by Glynn, Frank Benson, and Robert Hudson.



Above, [Virginia Poundstone's \*Flower Arrangement #1\*](#), 2013, fits snugly in a corner of the master bedroom, while [Channing Hansen's \*Didactic Fractalism\*](#), 2010, offers contemplation over the bed. [Carl Mannov's \*Speculative Skins \(Ice\)\*](#), 2006, left, is in steel, oil, plaster, and concrete. Opposite, from top, [Høibo's \*Untitled\*](#), 2013, hangs on the other side of the bedroom, while [Step to Earth](#), 2012, by [Elizabeth Neel](#), covers the facing wall.

Le Corbusier's LC2 chair, the frame of which uses recycled debris from the Harvard Art Museums' renovation. Nearby is Monahan's vitrinelike floral foam sculpture *Waiting for Use*, 1994/2005, which employs beeswax, pigment, encaustic, silver leaf, wood, glass, paper transfer drawing, carbon paper, wire, drywall, a found Chinese brush turned into a witch doctor, and a drawing of airplane schematics.

Rubeli's purchase of this Monahan piece was the result of a 2004 studio visit. "At the studio I didn't know what I was looking at—these pots on the stove cooking things, wax dripping, and drawings torn up on the floor—so all I could think of was to ask questions. We talked about the Cure, which is my favorite band, and then I left," says Rubeli. A year later, he got a call from someone at the Anton Kern Gallery urging him to buy *Waiting for Use* because it marked the first time the artist had left his rigid, symmetrical practice to activate studio ephemera. "It's kind of the first moment I realized it wasn't just about these objects. What you're doing by acquiring somebody's work is making a commitment to them as an artist, their ideas, their practice. The object in a lot of ways is the least concern I have in building a collection."

Two years after acquiring the piece, he not only let MOCA borrow it for Monahan's Focus exhibition, but gave the museum \$5,000 to remove its skylight covers. "At first I thought, 'Why am I going to do that? What am I going to get?'" Then it occurred to me: I don't need another thing; I'll just pay to support the

actual show,” says Rubeli, who has shown similar support to Tauba Auerbach, Glynn, and Alex Olson, whose abstract paintings, the collector says, “inhabit the mechanics, histrionics, and discipline of painting” more than anything else he’s ever seen. In the bedroom of the Rubelis’ daughter Elizabeth, Olson painted a mural on which other paintings can be pinned. Upson, another beneficiary of Rubeli’s support, created the hallway’s 2007 photos *Info-Info* and *Info-Redacted*, which document the work made from one man’s ephemera for her 2007 Hammer Projects exhibition.

“He has that philanthropic gene,” says Butler. “He’s interested in cultural institutions and thinking about them, and he wants to talk about all the arcane, museum-y stuff I want to talk about. He’s in it.”

“What I’m told is that it’s hardest to raise the small amounts of money, so supporting a show like that with \$5,000 to \$10,000, there’s maybe less of a notoriety attached to it, but it’s the support that’s most needed,” says Rubeli.

Similarly, focus areas of the collection include photography such as Catherine Opie’s first self-portrait, from 1970, and that first Lockhart image, which Rubeli finally tracked down through Blum & Poe two years ago. There are also textiles, such as Channing Hansen’s *Didactic Fractalism*, 2010, an algorithm-generated construction of merino wool, silk, and camel down and a handwoven-polyester and dye-sublimation-ink work from Margo Wolowicz; and works inspired by music, notably Dave Muller’s 2004 portrait of Rubeli, *John’s Top Ten (Somewhat Impulsive, Reluctantly Determined on Day 12, 911)*, which takes the form of the collector’s favorite albums and was painted to match his height. The collection is also very much a tribute to female artists, whose work represents the majority of the pieces on display and in storage.

“I think women double down on themselves and don’t necessarily want to be initiated into a boys’ club,” says Rubeli. “I have a humanistic view of things rather than a gender-specific view, and I find women are far more honest when it comes to being vulnerable and committing themselves. There’s a purity in the ambition female artists have.”

Although he never set out to befriend so many of the artists whose work he collects, he is mindful of being “just one move away from ‘the asshole from the label.’ I don’t want to end up influencing the creative process.” Still, the relationships come easily, likely because of his dedication to what fellow L.A. collector Dean Valentine calls “the validation process.”

Having served as vice president of A&R at Atlantic, cofounded Chop Shop Records, and supported countless artists along the way, Rubeli is now looking to go even further with an independent publishing and production effort that will focus on transparent accounting for emerging musicians and visual artists. “Ultimately, my passion is the same as that of the person who would make mixtapes and give them away to people,” he says. “If I’m into something, I’m not just going to support it but share it. That’s why I’m into emerging art—because that’s when it needs the most amplification.” 田

