

A Curatorial Vision: The West Collection

Colette Copeland

I first visited the West Collection, housed at SEI Investments's corporate headquarters in Oaks, Pennsylvania, on April Fool's Day, and the significance of the day was not lost on me. SEI's architecture is hardly your typical corporate office. It looks more like something out of a sci-fi movie. There's something magical and strange about traipsing through someone's work station to get a closer look at a shark constructed from rubber tires or gigantic shoes made of black licorice or a vinyl hand-sewn Hummer. Fake tropical plants interspersed within the industrial space add to the surreal environment. Al West, CEO of SEI Investments, and his daughter, Paige West, the collection's curator, have built the family-owned collection over the past ten years. Its mission is to acquire and showcase the most compelling and challenging contemporary art by emerging, international artists. In 2009, they launched the West Prize, which annually awards ten finalists \$10,000 purchase prizes and one \$25,000 grand prize.

Photography comprises the majority of the West Collection, which boasts quite a few heavy hitters—William Wegman, Shirin Neshat, Vik Muniz, Adam Fuss, Uta Barth, Anna Gaskell, Alfredo Jaar, Jill Greenberg, Mitch Epstein, David Maisel, and Sarah Charlesworth—acquired at a time when many were still considered to be emerging artists. It was thrilling to see work by relatively unknown photographers alongside some of the big names, such as Gilbert Garcin, who spent the majority of his life managing a lamp factory in France and didn't take up photography until age sixty-five. In his comical and surreal black-and-white photographs, he superimposes himself into texts, creating imaginary worlds (see cover).

All images courtesy The West Collection, Oaks, Pennsylvania

Opposite: Long-Bin Chen, Reading Room, 2003, 1000 phone books, plywood, and wheels, 72 x 96 x 96 inches

The constructed image dominates the collection. Oliver Boberg creates small detailed models of banal industrial architectural sites and photographs them. The fictitious landscapes are so convincing I assumed they were formal photographs of actual sites. Conversely, Estaban Pastorino Diaz makes photographs of real landscapes that look fake. He uses a remote controlled camera attached to a kite to produce aerial images from unusual perspectives. Nic Nicosia also blurs the line between illusion and reality by introducing elements from movies and television, satirically referring to our perception and consumption of the ideal landscape. And 2010 West Prize winner David Almeida's photographs ironically interpret scientific specimen drawings. His "plates" feature colorful plastic versions of animal and plant life.

During the second day of my two-day visit, I was fortunate enough to see the 2010 West Prize award ceremony and had the opportunity to interview curator Paige West and some of the 2009 and 2010 prize winners.

Colette Copeland: How was the West Collection started?

Paige West: After college, I worked at SEI for four years. I loved the company; however I wasn't passionate about financial investments. Since I was a little girl, I've been passionate about art. I went to college as a studio art major. After SEI, I worked in a one-year program at Christie's to see if I wanted to make a career in the art world. I then went to New York University for their arts and administration program.

My father [wanted] to put together an art collection for the new SEI headquarters and wanted me to oversee it. I hesitated at first; a corporate art collection always seemed watered down to me. I wasn't sure my father would support my vision to collect edgy, emerging artists. [But] he agreed with my vision and gave some directives of his own. The collection is private and owned by the West family, yet is on permanent loan to SEI. There are no financial ties to the company.



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At first there was some resistance [from] the employees when we started hanging the work. But I think knowing that the collection is not taking away from bonuses or affecting the company's bottom line has helped [them] to embrace it.

Copeland: How does your background in studio art as well as business influence your role as curator of the collection and also owner and director of the Mixed Greens gallery in New York?

West: The business side is much more prevalent on the gallery side. If some galleries took more of a business approach, the art world would have a much broader audience and contemporary collecting community. The Mixed Greens website is still one of the only [gallery websites] to have e-commerce. Most galleries do not sell work off or list prices on their site.

The collection is more heart than brain. We have not looked at it as an investment. It's about the art and artists. An important benefit is get-

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ting to know the artists. When we buy works, we don't plan on holding them for a certain number of years, then selling them at auction. We just don't work that way.

Copeland: Given the nature of SEI's business, the clients have the money to invest in art. Lee [Stoetzel, gallery director] and I were speaking about the Long-Bin Chen's phone book sculpture *Reading Room* (2003) and how many clients have inquired about purchasing it. (See p. 19.) Have you sold much of your collection?

West: Clients ask Lee all the time about how they can purchase one of those pieces. Lee jokes that he's probably sold twenty of those sculptures for the artist. It's a great opportunity to introduce the clients to new artists. We had two Cindy Sherman works put up for sale [because] we had purchased them fifteen years ago and did not continue to collect her work given her high price point. We were able to sell them at auction and purchase a lot more emerging artists' work. We'll only sell if there's something that doesn't fit in the collection or if we only have one or two works by that particular artist. We tend to buy a series of works from each artist. We like to keep up with their careers and continue to collect their work.

Copeland: When my writing students from the University of Pennsylvania and I visited the collection, they characterized the innovative architecture as futuristic. The building was designed to align with the corporate mission, which is radically innovative for its time. There seems to be a symbiotic relationship between the corporate vision and the West Collection's collecting philosophy. You take risks and aren't afraid of showing difficult or political work.

West: Yes, most of the credit for that goes to my father's vision. Today it's the norm, but twenty years ago, few companies focused on creating an environment that centers on open, shared space and flexible mobility. Innovative thinking and pushing the envelope are part of the corporate culture. We look for artists who are doing that in their work.

Copeland: Given the controversial nature of some of the art, I was intrigued with the "hot hall"* as a way of respecting employees' personal

work space, and as a means of diffusing any objections or concerns regarding the work. The comments and responses serve as a way to encourage, educate, and foster dialogue.

West: During our first week of hanging work, employees made disparaging comments like "You call that art?" or "You can't hang that here." We recognized that the employees [needed] to understand the art and have a voice. We gave tours to employees; we hosted lunchtime informal artist chats, where the employees could listen to artists speak about their work. One employee filed suit deeming an artwork obscene. We immediately removed the work from the employee's workstation. We respect the employees, but also the artists. We didn't want to put the work in storage. If it was eliciting that much emotional response, we felt it was worthy of a discussion. The hot hall facilitates this.

Copeland: Private collections like the Margulies's or the Rubell's showcase art work in a museum atmosphere that is open to the public. In the corporate workplace, employees live and work around the art. How do you define the West audience?

West: Thousands of clients come through this building every year. The employees bring their families. We've introduced contemporary art to thousands of people who wouldn't ordinarily visit a contemporary museum or a place like the Rubell Family Collection. I'd like to see us push further. We currently have more work than we can show. We'd like to pursue having a space open to the public that's more readily accessible.

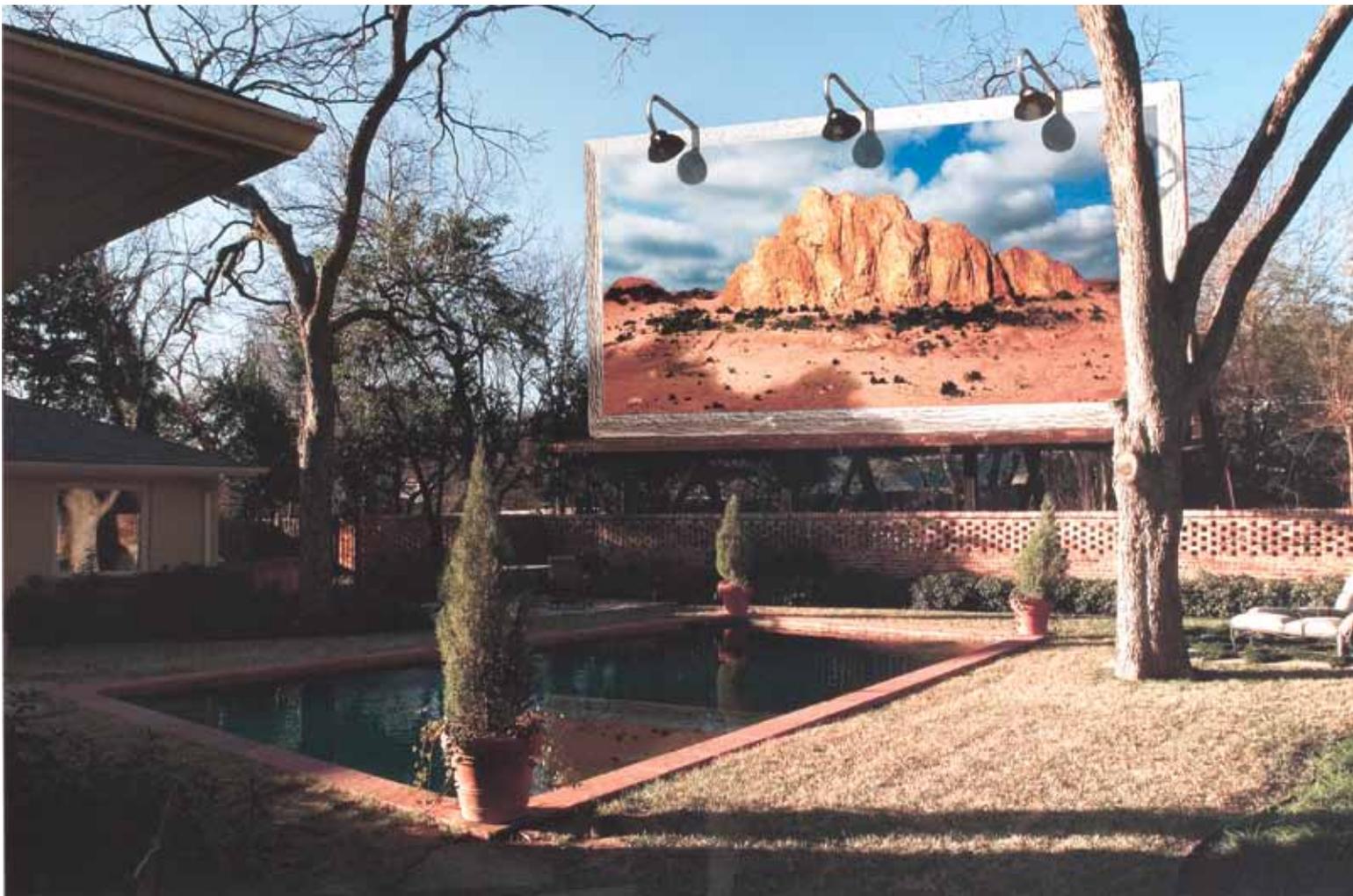
Copeland: You've broadened your audience by curating themed exhibitions from the collection that travel to various institutions.

West: We support loaning out the collection. It provides more exposure for us, and also the artists. We are very committed to supporting artists. The West Prize grew out of this commitment; this is the second year. The prize is awarded annually. We acquire \$10,000 in work from each of the ten finalists. One will win the grand prize of \$25,000 to further their career.

Copeland: Sarah Thornton's ethnography *Seven Days in the Art World* has a chapter entitled "The Prize" in which she interviews Turner Prize finalists. She questions how a prize both legitimizes as well as scrutinizes artists' careers. How did the West Prize come about?

West: The prize originated out of market conditions. Art market prices had skyrocketed and we could no longer afford emerging artists' work that galleries were sending our way. Even recent MFA grads' work was

* The hot hall is an area where contested or controversial works are displayed when an employee does not want them in his or her workspace. Employees are encouraged to write comments, which are posted with the works. The artists' statements as well as responses from the curator and director are also posted as a means to foster an open dialogue. Hot hall works are also put up for "adoption," meaning another employee may request to have it in his or her work environment.



Nic Nicosia, *Untitled Landscape #3*, 2003, archival inkjet on Somerset watercolor paper, 31 x 48 inches

starting at \$10K. Work was overpriced. We went to schools and did studio visits, but weren't seeing the amount of affordable emerging work that we saw ten years ago. The prize is a way for artists to come to us. It's free and anyone can upload their work digitally online. From word of mouth, we received 3,700 applications last year and 3,000 this year. The prize also emerged as a way to generate more exposure for the collection and the artists; more people are touring and visiting the collection. We've also been very pleased that we've had winners from Philadelphia both years. [SEI's offices are about forty minutes outside Philadelphia.] It is a testament to the wealth of local talent.

Copeland: Thornton's book explores the economics surrounding the art world. The perspective of art as a sound financial investment is much contested, probably more so since the market crashed. What is your position on art as a financial investment?

West: We were all taught to buy what we love. Some people have gotten away from that. Instead of buying what they love, they ask the advice of museum curators or gallery directors. At the height of the boom, hedge fund managers all wanted in on the action, because there were numbers to show profitability. In my book *The Art of Buying Art: An Insider's Guide to Collecting Contemporary Art* (2007), I talk a lot about good vs. bad art. I'm not speaking about taste (whether you like it or not), but about the business of art. What has to happen for an artist to get gallery representation and then into a museum collection? What are the conditions for the artists' work to increase in price? If these things happen, then we can point to that as good art. From an investment perspective, investors are projecting the trajectory of an artist's career, based on where the artist has shown and what the promise is for the future. I understand that philosophy from a business perspective and some people have been very successful using that model.



Sarah Charlesworth, Red Veils, 1993, cibachrome print, 55 x 45 inches (4 in an edition of 6)

That's not why I collect. However, I am very proud of how our investment has grown. A strong percentage of our artists have gone on to make it big. Some may call it "having an eye." Generally I go with my gut. If I like it and it fits within our mission, I'll buy it. That comes from years of experience/immersion in the art world.

Copeland: Do you have personal favorites? Are photographs easier to place within the corporate environment than sculpture? Does your collecting strategy differ with photographs?

West: The photography is my favorite part of the collection. We've collected more photography than any other medium. When we started the collection, photography was really hot in the art world. This was the time when constructed photography was prevalent. I don't have a specific favorite. I tend to love the art more

when I have a strong relationship with the artist. I adore Vik Muniz's work. I've had the longest working relationship with him.

Copeland: Lee said that 50 percent of the photography collection fits within the "constructed" genre. In the past few years, the trend has moved away from constructed photography. What do you attribute to this shift?

West: The market became oversaturated with that type of work.

Copeland: What type of photography are you looking at today?

West: Most of the collecting is through the prize submissions, which always include photography. There is a list of twenty-five artists who didn't win one of the ten prizes, but whose work I'm following. Other



Gilbert Garcin, Narcissus Tortured, 2002, black-and-white photographic print, 8 x 12 inches (1 in an edition of 12)

curators and gallerists also look at the submissions, so it's great exposure for the artists. The photography that I'm most interested in right now is installation-based, work that incorporates space.

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I asked a few past and current prize winners to answer the following question: A prize can legitimize an artist through publicity, exposure, and financial means. Conversely, a prize can also place an artist under scrutiny. What has your experience been?

Leah Bailis (2010 winner): Well, I was really broke. I probably had \$20 in my bank account, so that money was really excellent. To be recognized is great. I also had two really big sculptures, which took up most of my studio space. I couldn't afford to rent a storage unit. Now they have a permanent home. I'm the only Philly artist, so I do feel a bit scrutinized. I don't think it will change my work in any way.

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Esteban Pastorino Díaz, Alcazaba (castle), 2006, c-print, 30 x 40 inches

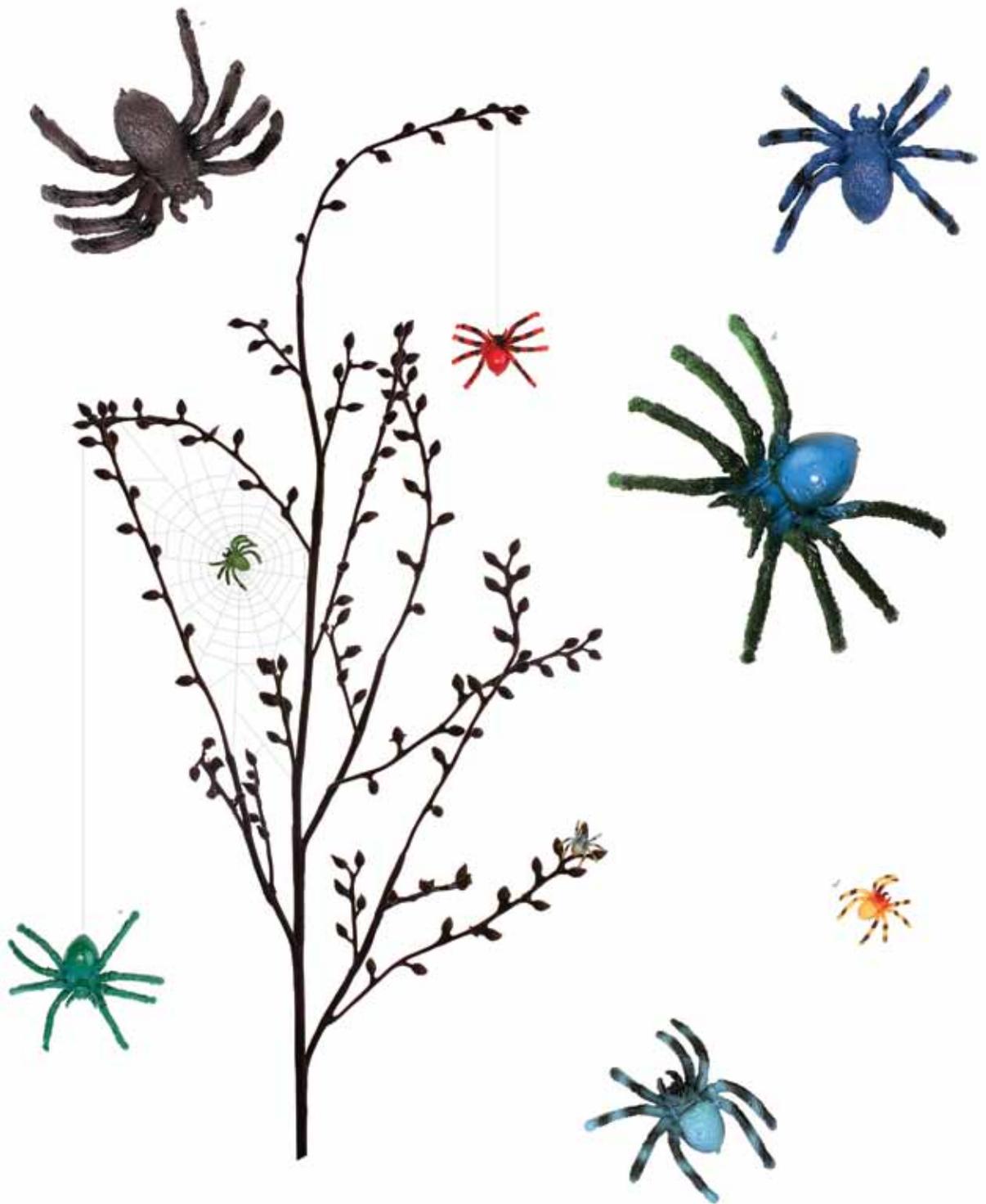
James Johnson (2009 winner): I haven't experienced any negative fallout from the prize. The show from last year traveled to Art Chicago. There were a lot of curators who saw the work. It was a bit nerve-racking, but you have to keep your cool. The exposure and the financial part of the prize enabled me to make some work that I'd never be able to afford otherwise. I made a work from an 8 ½" x 11" sheet of 14-karat gold. The prize allowed me to raise the bar on my work.

David Almeida (2010 winner): Being selected as a West Prize finalist has been an important achievement and recognition for [me] as an emerging artist. It is the first collection to acquire my work with quite

a prestigious and innovative lineup of artists to be among. The collaborative nature of the collection [could] lead to future opportunities.

Ryan McClennan (2010 grand prize winner): The West Prize has been a big deal for me personally and afforded me more time to focus on my work. There has been exposure, but not much has changed. Sales have remained the same and I have not been offered shows outside of the galleries I am already working with. The West Prize has done for me exactly what it is intended to do, support a working artist. Concentrating on artwork full time is most important to me, and I am able to do that.

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Plate 8

David Almeida, Plate 8, 2009, c-print, 20 x 16 inches