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At SEI Investments, Paige West (right) and Lee Stoetzel, who assembled the collection, with *Speak Slowly, I Am a Natural Blonde!*, an oil by Ken Weaver.

The halls are alive

Cutting-edge art — 2,000 pieces in all — comes to the corporate campus at SEI Investments in Montgomery County. By Roberta Fallon



Red Veils, laminated cibachrome
with laquered wood frame. Sarah Charlesworth,
44 by 54 inches, 1992-1993
WEST COLLECTION AT SEI

L

ook what they've done to the "cube farm." When you go to work at SEI Investments, you can sit on an art chair by Richard Artschwager, gaze up at an oversized hydrangea by Alyson Shotz hanging from the ceiling, or peruse a 10-foot-tall painting of a little girl in a blue dress. She isn't Alice, and you aren't in Wonderland,

but the art kind of takes you places.

With pitched roofs and big windows, the buildings at the corporate campus in Oaks, Montgomery County, resemble barns more than offices. Designed by the Minneapolis firm of Meyer, Scherer & Rockcastle, the buildings are connected by walkways, a Minnesota winter technique that helps in Pennsylvania summers. Inside the buildings, there is art — in the stairwells, at the drinking fountains, in the cafeteria; 2,000 pieces on the walls, on the floors, hanging from the ceiling.

It's all there because Al West didn't want pretty pictures.

When West, 59, founder and chairman of SEI Investments, opened his high-tech headquarters in 1996, he wanted provocative art — art that would fuel discussions around the water cooler.

And he wanted his daughter Paige, then 28, to build a collection.

At the time, she was in an art-history and connoisseurship program at Christie's auction house. She told her father she'd give him the names of art consultants. But he wanted *her* for the job.

"I said OK, but we go with my taste — emerging artists and contemporary work, not Wyeth," she said.

When SEI employees show people around, they're almost certain to stop at Hot Hall. A brightly lit utility corridor leading to a parking ramp and the employee gym, Hot Hall is the place to see "the most viewed, most talked about" part of the collection, says Lee Stoetzel, director of the West Collection.

If an employee finds a piece of art too provocative or unsettling, it goes to Hot Hall — not as an exile but to stimulate discussion and exchange.

Red Veils, a photograph by Sarah Charlesworth, was a recent Hot Hall resident. Oval in shape, the work looks like a family portrait except that the faces are swathed in what appear to be red silk hoods. Comments pro and con soon surrounded the picture.

"It's almost as if you're seeing a kidnapping
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Roberta Fallon is a freelance art critic based in Bala Cynwyd.



Big Girl, painting by
Sean Mallyn,
10 feet, 1998

WEST COLLECTION AT 30



Left panel of Mass, cibachrome
diptych by Vik Muniz, 1997

WEST COLLECTION AT 30



Right panel of Mass, cibachrome
diptych by Vik Muniz, 1997

WEST COLLECTION AT 30

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in progress," read one e-mail, "or an act of terrorism."

Darlene Singleton, a security guard who has been with S&B for five years, hardly concurs. She was planning to adopt *Red Hill* back into the main office space and have it placed near her desk. The reason? "I just love it."

There's no limit to how long a work can stay in Hot Hall. Convinced of the educational effectiveness of this ersatz gallery, Stoetzel is prepared to expand it. He hopes that when people see *Red Hill* integrated back into the workplace — or the 10-foot-tall *Big Girl*, another recent adoptee — more adoptions will result.



Kitty Cloud



Snail Cloud



Praying Hands Cloud



The Pot Cloud

Silver prints on rag paper, from the Equivalent Series by Vik Muniz, 1997
WEST COLLECTION #18

Paige West is passionate about art and artists. But you need more than passion to buy art, especially on the scale of the SEI collection. You need gut instincts and money.

The West family money, which funds the private collection, has not been an issue. As for instincts, Paige West logged 300 studio visits, mostly in New York, before she bought her first piece for the collection. She looked, listened, and defined her taste.

Ready to buy, she enlisted Soetzel. They became the collection's art-buying team. Soetzel, 34, also handles day-to-day operations.

They've been bold, buying before the critics and the crowds weigh in. This strategy has not only helped them get good prices but also given them cachet as knowledgeable risk-takers.

"It's a real underground collection," says Sid Sachs, director of the University of the Arts' Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery. He means that at the time their work was purchased, the artists represented at SEI weren't household names — yet.

"They have a Leonardo Drew. How many people have a Leonardo Drew?" said Sachs, referring to a young artist from New York whose star is rising. "I don't like every-

thing in the collection, but I like a lot of it. It's an interesting mix. [SEI] could be its own museum."

After six years, West and Soetzel have assembled a collection of first-rank and up-and-coming artists based in New York. Among the stars are Cindy Sherman, a photographer and 1995 MacArthur "genius" grant winner known for photographing herself in disguise, and Gabriel Orozco, a Mexican sculptor and photographer who was commissioned by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1999 to create a work for its Museum Studies series.

One of the collection's specialties is set-

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Donald Lipski's *Untitled (Saw with Girdles)* hanging at upper left, and Julien Opie's *Baroque Towers 2, 3, & 4*.



West Collection at SEI

Hands, from the Pictures of Soil Series, cibachrome by Vik Muniz, 1997

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up photography, in which the artists stage tableaux and then photograph them. Among the photographers who have such work in the West Collection are Laurie Simmons, a Tyler School of Art graduate seen in last year's "Almost Warm and Fuzzy" exhibition at P.S. 1 Museum in Queens; James Casabere, a photographer of architectural set-ups seen last year in "Architectural Unconscious" at the Institute of Contemporary Art; the late Francesca Woodman, who used herself as a model; and Brazilian native Vik Muniz, so beloved by West and Stoetzel that they commissioned him to fill a hallway at SEI with photographs and sculpture.

Also in the collection are sculptors Julian Opie, Allan McCollum and Rony Patra, whose 2002 Whitney Biennial piece, a 50-foot-tall stainless steel tree in Central Park, caused a stir recently in New York. Painters include James Hyde, whose *Radius* was the first item bought for the collection; Steven Charles, affiliated with the Brooklyn gallery Pierogi; Spencer Finch,

creator of whimsical riffs on art and science; and Sean Mcllyn, painter of *Big Girl*.

With the collection reaching critical mass, West now looks for work by artists whose pieces fit the broad themes of the collection, among them abstract art, nature, and set-up photography. Relying on lists of names from local curators and artists, she and Stoetzel recently dropped by the Fishtown and Northern Liberties studios of Astrid Bowlby, Joy Feasley and Tristan Lowe. They bought work from each.

Al West sees art as a catalyst. "The collection's intent is not to aesthetically please but to make one think," he said. "And I believe it has accomplished that. These artists are redefining the boundaries of the box we tend to put things in, and their work usually joins the senses." ●

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