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Right: Pamela J Joyner, photographed in front of Leonardo Drew's *Number 25A1*, 2018; facing page: Jack Whitten, *Black Monolith X (The Birth of Muhammad Ali)*, 2016

American collector and philanthropist Pamela J Joyner, in partnership with her husband, Alfred J Giuffrida, collects work by modern and contemporary African American and African diaspora artists, ensuring often-overlooked artists are acknowledged and younger ones supported. She speaks to *Elizabeth Fullerton* about abstraction and her collection



PHOTO: DREW ALTZER © DREW ALTZER

Meet the collectors: Pamela J Joyner

Pamela J Joyner describes herself as an ‘activist collector’. She and her husband, Alfred J Giuffrida, have assembled one of the pre-eminent collections of largely abstract postwar and contemporary African American art. Their goal is to reframe art history to ensure overlooked artists are included in the canon. According to *ArtReview*, which ranked her Number 13 on its Power 100 art world list for 2020, ‘No collector in the 21st century has done more to change the official narrative of postwar American art than Joyner.’ Joyner and Giuffrida’s energetic championing of artists, ranging from early abstractionists such as Norman Lewis and Alma Thomas to contemporary stars such as Mark Bradford and Shinique Smith, has been instrumental in the recent surge of institutional interest in Black artists. ‘We always had a focus but we didn’t always have a mission,’ Joyner says from her San Francisco home when we speak via Zoom at the end of 2020. That changed in 2009, when former Tate director Nicholas Serota asked her to lunch to request her help in expanding Tate’s African American art collection. ‘That’s when I started thinking about it systematically. I thought, “OK, maybe I can make a difference here.” That was really an “Aha!” moment for me.’

Joyner, who founded a marketing firm in San Francisco, is a trustee of the Tate Americas Foundation, the Art Institute of Chicago and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) and sits on the steering committee of the newly founded Black Trustee Alliance for Art Museums, which aims to diversify art-world infrastructures. In 2017 she joined the board of the J Paul Getty Trust and within two years the Getty Research Institute announced a \$5m (£3.7m) African American Art History Initiative, as well as the acquisition of Los Angeles-based artist Betye Saar’s archives. Joyner’s activism is two-pronged, focusing on acquisitions and scholarship. ‘It’s not that exhibitions and programming are not important, but what is permanent are works in the collection and works on view. So, if there’s a show and there’s work in it that you’ve lent or donated, what supports that permanence is the scholarship,’ she explains. Joyner was closely involved in the ground-breaking exhibition ‘Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power’, which opened at Tate Modern in 2017 and travelled around museums in America until August 2020. Joyner accompanied the curators Mark Godfrey and Zoé Whitley on studio visits

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Pamela J Joyner



Right: Jack Whitten, *Omikron I*, 1977; below: Frank Bowling, *Samson's Arrival*, 1989-90; facing page: Norman Lewis, *Afternoon*, 1969

and lent works to the show. ‘It was one of life’s most rewarding experiences,’ she notes. ‘I decided that if there is a heaven for Pam Joyner, it was Gallery 12, where all of those abstract works were.’ She and her husband gifted Sam Gilliam’s ‘Drape’ painting *Carousel Change* (1970) to Tate and have promised the museum Jack Whitten’s black triangular *Homage to Malcolm X* (1970), currently hanging in their living room. The gifts are a reward to the curators, she says, ‘for doing that scholarship, for highlighting careers that should have been highlighted very many years ago’.

As well as introducing myriad talented and neglected African American artists to a broad audience, the show wove together narratives of different groupings and debates around abstraction, Black identity and Black creativity at a time of social and political upheaval, demonstrating there was no overarching ‘Black art’ aesthetic. And it continues to have profound reverberations. ‘So much of the moment we are

experiencing in the art world today around the high visibility of Black artists I think owes the fact of its existence to ‘Soul of a Nation,’ she says.

Joyner was always passionate about the arts. Growing up in Chicago, she was ‘a poster child for early arts education’. Her parents, both teachers, were born in the Jim Crow Deep South and experienced harsh segregation. When they migrated north to the promised land of Chicago, they wanted their daughter to obtain a rich education. Between ballet and music lessons, she would slip into the Art Institute of Chicago and gaze at Georges Seurat’s *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884-86). But her parents were devastated when Joyner decided to take time out from her undergraduate studies at Dartmouth College to pursue professional ballet, funding herself by waiting tables in New York. To their relief, Joyner discovered she was a ‘mediocre’ ballerina and instead went to Harvard Business School to get her MBA, although she

never abandoned the idea of being involved in the arts. ‘I do take the collecting aspect of my life really seriously. I’m retired from business, so I run this like a business,’ she says.

The Joyner-Giuffrida collection counts around 400 works of art from the 1940s to the present, comprising mostly painting and some sculpture. About half the collection is spread between their San Francisco home and their house in Sonoma [north of San Francisco, where they offer a residency for artists and curators]. Some 50 works are on loan at any time. In 2016, the couple published *Four Generations: The Joyner/Giuffrida Collection of Abstract Art*, with contributions from museum directors, curators and scholars. The book effectively became the catalogue for an acclaimed three-year touring exhibition that told an intergenerational story about abstraction’s evolution into a tool for social change.

Joyner was encouraged to start collecting by Lowery Stokes Sims, the first African



American curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Her first purchase in the 1990s was a representational gouache by acclaimed artist Jacob Lawrence, but at that stage her motivation was simply filling walls. Soon afterwards, she fell in love with Richard Mayhew’s luscious melting landscapes and her interest shifted towards abstraction, an ideological as much as aesthetic decision. She became attracted to those African American artists pursuing abstraction in the face of criticism from Black leaders, who accused them of selling out to the white establishment and demanded they represent legible, Black subject matter. ‘Not only is abstraction radical, it’s subversive because you just couldn’t get any acknowledgement for doing that work; in fact, the work was derided. I’m a bit of a contrarian myself,’ admits Joyner, ‘so I admire people who have the courage of their convictions in that way.’

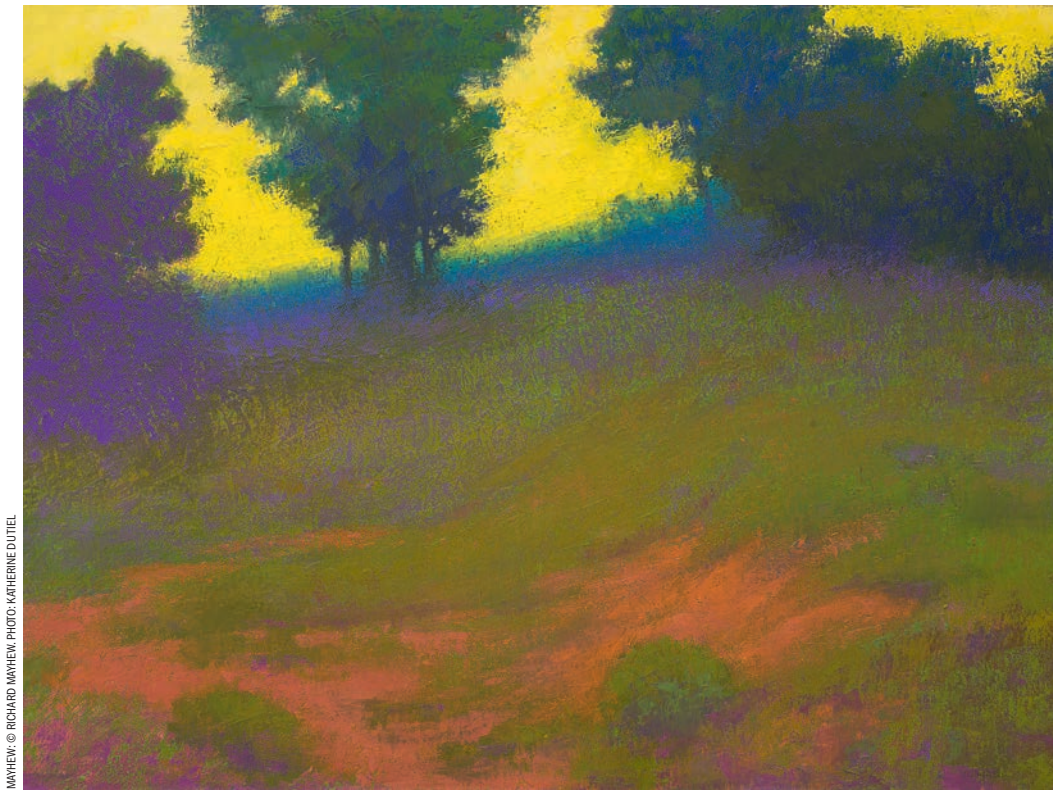
Norman Lewis, who was a founder of the Spiral collective of African American artists

and insisted on Black artists’ right to resist social narrative in their work, is one of her heroes. Joyner and Giuffrida consider Lewis’ 1969 painting *Afternoon*, an exuberant expanse of brushmarks dancing on a vibrant yellow ground, as the lynchpin of their collection. ‘Everyone from Frank Bowling to Sam Gilliam, to Jack Whitten to Al Loving, that whole generation, points to Norman Lewis as their inspiration and direct mentor,’ says Joyner. ‘Norman gave these artists confidence that they could do what they felt compelled to do when the environment said that Black artists aren’t supposed to paint abstraction.’ The couple has sought to capture the narrative arc of key artists’ careers, collecting pieces that exemplify every phase of Lewis’ work, for instance. Similarly, they have bought across British artist Bowling’s six-decade practice. ‘We own pretty much every series. I think he’s one of the greatest living painters so it’s been really important to us to represent that career,’ she says.



Kevin Beasley, *The Reunion*,
2018 (front view shown below,
back view shown right)





Left: Richard Mayhew, *Good Morning*, 2000; below: Virginia Jaramillo, *Divide*, 1964; below, left: Sam Gilliam, *Stand*, 1973; facing page: Kara Walker *Terrible Vacation*, 2014

So what does Joyner look for in a work of art? ‘Almost every artist in our collection touches other artists,’ she says. The other fundamental draw is innovation. Joyner singles out Gilliam’s stretcherless ‘Drape’ paintings, which he began in 1968, Ed Clark’s first shaped canvas from 1957 – three years before Frank Stella started his shaped canvas works – and Suzanne Jackson, who makes gossamer-like paintings from layered acrylic, without any canvas underneath. But the foremost innovator in the collection, she believes, is Whitten. Joyner points to a spectacular mosaic-like painting behind her from 2016, titled *Black Monolith X (The Birth of Muhammad Ali)*. In the 1980s Whitten developed a painstaking technique of creating paintings by layering handmade tiles of paint he called ‘tesserae’, inspired by ancient Greek mosaics. His homage to Muhammad Ali, part of a series of works honouring black luminaries, features a pink nucleus floating on a large black cell-like form, attached to a smaller black form, both against a shimmering, silvery background made from thousands of these laminated acrylic-paint

tesserae. Whitten saw this work as referencing the boxer’s double birth: first as Cassius Clay and then his spiritual rebirth as Ali during the Black Power movement. Thus, like many peers, the artist found his own way to infuse his abstractions with a sociopolitical dimension. Whitten’s ‘developer paintings’ were also pioneering. In 1970, he drew a squeegee-like tool (he called it the ‘developer’) across his canvas a decade before Gerhard Richter developed his signature smearing technique using squeegees. Joyner recounts how, when Mark Godfrey was curating a Richter show at Tate Modern, she introduced him to a Whitten developer work from 1973. ‘He says, “Well I don’t know this Richter,” and I said, “It’s not Richter – look at the date.”’ Joyner took Godfrey to Whitten’s studio. ‘Three and a half hours later Mark said to Jack, “I’m sorry history hasn’t given you your due.”’ Joyner was largely responsible for the efforts to redress that before Whitten’s death in 2018. While Joyner is especially fond of abstraction, figurative work by artists such as Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and Jordan Casteel have



JARAMILLO. © VIRGINIA JARAMILLO. COURTESY HALES GALLERY, NEW YORK AND LONDON

increasingly appeared in the collection. And she and her husband have expanded their collecting in the past 10 years to include artists from the African diaspora. In South Africa alone they have bought works by a range of artists including Nicholas Hlobo, Moshekwa Langa, Zander Blom and Kemang Wa Lehulere. Brazil is another area of focus for 2021. With travel hindered by the coronavirus pandemic this past year, Joyner has been filling gaps in the collection. Her target has been early women abstractionists such as Suzanne Jackson, Mary Lovelace O’Neal and Virginia Jaramillo. ‘Interestingly, when you get to the next generation, the Lorna Simpson, Kara Walker generation, our holdings are probably more than 50 per cent women,’ she says. This is the case in the youngest generation too, with artists such as Firelei Báez, Christina Quarles and Lauren Halsey. ‘I mean, there are just a lot of them, right? I need to go and find some men.’ It’s a nice quandary to have for once.

Besides filling geographical, generational and gender gaps, Joyner hopes to enlarge her sculpture holdings. ‘I do love sculpture, but that is a real-estate decision, and I don’t have a sculpture park,’ she says. Joyner and Giuffrida are major fans of Martin Puryear, Simone Leigh, Leonardo Drew and Kara Walker. Of the latter,

who is not a natural fit for the collection but is critical to the art-historical narrative, Joyner says: ‘She’s a little bit like eating one potato chip. You can’t eat just one; you have to have a lot of it. Whatever your aesthetic is, if you’re trying for inclusion, innovation, impact, how can you overlook Kara Walker? You cannot.’ They own a maquette of Walker’s *Fons Americanus*, Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall commission for 2019, and it sounds like they have grand plans for future purchases. Joyner says cryptically: ‘We have ambitions. Stay tuned.’

For Joyner and Giuffrida, getting to know the artists is one of the joys of collecting. They invite five or six to participate in their annual residency programme. Past recipients include Casteel, Drew and Kevin Beasley. There is no requirement to make work. ‘You have to do two things. You have to sign the artist book and you have to allow me to give you a luncheon or a dinner where I typically invite collectors, curators, writers.’ Commissions tend to result haphazardly. Like the time the couple were sitting drinking wine with Beasley in the living room. Noting all the walls were filled, Giuffrida joked, ‘“Well, you haven’t touched the ceilings.” And Kevin said, “I’ve been thinking about a ceiling piece.” I said, “Consider yourself commissioned.”’ The result

was a ‘magnificent’ work that ended up being ‘maybe 10ft by 15ft [3m x 4.5m]’, weighing about 250lb [113kg] and needing six people to install. ‘Fortunately, the ceiling didn’t come down.’ What is special about the Joyner-Giuffrida approach is their loyalty and commitment to stewarding their artists. They don’t sell the work, though they place a lot in eminent institutions. In 2020 they donated six works by Richard Mayhew – the last living member of the Spiral collective, who will be 97 in April – to SFMOMA, where he now has a dedicated room. Joyner insists that even successful artists need careful scholarship to guarantee their place in art history. ‘This collection chronicles a story of struggle and triumph. But I’d still say it’s a work in progress as to whether even the participants in our story have gotten to the height of triumph,’ says Joyner. ‘Whether you’re talking about Julie Mehretu, Kerry James Marshall or Mark Bradford, they’ve become more triumphant than anybody in this narrowly defined field that is their predecessor. But compared to their global peers, the question is: can they get to the highest level of triumph?’

● The new expanded edition of *Four Generations: The Joyner/Giuffrida Collection of Abstract Art* (2019) is published by Gregory R Miller & Co



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