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A new lust for art takes hold in Silicon Valley

When Allison and Dan Rose moved into their historic Palo Alto home, their art was essentially limited to Pottery Barn and Z Gallerie buys.

It was interior designer Jon de la Cruz who suggested the couple consider elevating their acquisitions. Four years later, the walls of their 1905 Craftsman are decorated with contemporary works from the likes of John Chiara, Gabriel Orozco, Ed Ruscha, Richard Serra and Hiroshi Sugimoto.

"We started buying a few pieces, learning a little bit more and discovering some more artists," Allison Rose says. "It just kind of snowballed into this love of learning more about art, and it's totally addictive."

The Roses are just the sort of Silicon Valley denizens that Pace Gallery President Marc Glimcher had in mind when he opened a Palo Alto outpost last year.

Pace Palo Alto has hosted shows for James Turrell, Louise Nevelson and Tara Donovan. Through June 11, the gallery is presenting David Hockney's "The Yosemite Suite," focusing on works depicting the national park that the 79-year-old artist created with an iPad.

In addition to New York, where it is headquartered, Pace has galleries in London, Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Seoul. It may seem like San Francisco, rather than Palo Alto, would make sense to add to that list. But not so, says Glimcher.

"There was no significant presence by a commercial gallery in Silicon Valley," he explains. "When an amazing thing comes on the market, (art collectors in the area) can't always get on a plane and go to New York to see them. So now that really amazing thing will come to them."

And there is certainly evidence of an increasing appetite for contemporary and modern art in the suburbs. Art Silicon Valley/San Francisco, which highlights postwar and modern works, is returning to San Mateo in October for its fifth annual edition; over the course of its three days, the event has drawn more than 10,000 visitors.

For those new to purchasing art — or who simply want to view it and increase their exposure — smaller galleries can often be less intimidating. Earlier this year, Katharina Powers, an attorney who previously worked in finance, debuted Art Ventures Gallery in Menlo Park. A recently inaugurated show that runs through June 9, "Street Art: SFO vs. LA," features artists from San Francisco, Oakland and Los Angeles.

Suzanne Whitney-Smedt opened contemporary fine art gallery Whitney Modern last fall in downtown Los Gatos. "Being an art lover/collector myself, I've always had to travel to the big cities to get a good dose of contemporary art," she says. "I think we've begun to fill this void and will continue to do so as our gallery grows."

And she knows firsthand that there's an interest in the valley for the artists she represents. Her husband, painter Gordon Smedt, has long attracted venture capitalists and tech execs as clients. A show of his works, "Big Boy," is on view at Whitney Modern through May 28.

San Mateo interior designer Kendra Nash often turns to Bryant Street Gallery for her clients. “They cultivate some of the most innovative and talented artists, at all different price points,” says Nash, who is especially fond of painter Karl Pilato.

For further inspiration and education on contemporary art, a must-visit is the 3-year-old Anderson Collection. The museum at Stanford features modern and contemporary American art from the likes of Wayne Thiebaud, Richard Diebenkorn, Jackson Pollock and Josef Albers.

An exhibition of Nick Cave’s work, including his “Soundsuits,” can be enjoyed through Aug. 14. Cave’s life-size sculptures, which can be worn as costumes and performed in, are made of an array of materials — from old buttons to beaded baskets to sequins and even sock monkeys.

Next door to the Anderson is the Cantor Arts Center, well known for its Rodin Sculpture Garden. But even this institution, with a classical reputation, is noticeably integrating more contemporary programming.

“There have been a lot more works by contemporary artists on display,” confirms Matthew Tiews, Stanford’s associate vice president for the arts. “And I think it helps bring into the present day the historical work that’s on display.”

Case in point: Spencer Finch’s light sculpture “Betelgeuse” is suspended over Rodin’s iconic “The Thinker.” “It almost gives the sense of ‘The Thinker’ having this spark of an idea that’s happening above his head,” Tiews says. “And there’s a real sense of connection there between a very innovative creation of the 19th century and a very innovative creation of the 21st century.”

Tiews’ department is also bringing “artists to campus across the board, in many different areas,” he says. For three days, May 24-26, New York-based Hope Gangloff — the first Diekman Contemporary Commissions Program artist — will be intermittently painting large-scale portraits in the Cantor’s atrium. Gangloff’s completed works will be on view through April 2018.

Across the street from the Cantor and Anderson is Andy Goldsworthy’s Stone River. The 320-foot sculpture is made of sandstone from university buildings that were casualties of the 1906 or 1989 earthquakes. It is among the dozens of public art pieces that dot Stanford.

Elsewhere on campus, Peter Wegner’s “Monument to Change as It Changes,” located at Cemex Auditorium, comprises constantly in-motion colored cards in its 2,048 flip-digit modules; Alyson Shotz’s large-scale “Three Fold” consists of a trio of latticework sculptures that seems to float overhead in the Li Ka Shing Center for Learning and Knowledge; and Joan Miró’s bronze “Oiseau” can be found in the sunken patio of the Cummings Art Building.

For more outdoor art, plan a visit to Djerassi in Woodside. From March to September, the 583-acre ranch — which is open to the public on an extremely limited basis — offers sculpture hikes. The tours highlight pieces created and donated over the years by those in the Djerassi Resident Artists Program.

Silicon Valley Open Studios takes place each May. This weekend focuses on central Silicon Valley (including Palo Alto, Los Altos and Mountain View), while the third and final weekend of May 20-21 covers the southern area and Pacific Coast (including Los Gatos, San Jose, Half Moon Bay and Pacifica).

According to Pace’s Glimcher, historically, various sectors have emerged as major contemporary art patrons over certain periods. In New York City, for example, during the 1970s and 1980s, real estate titans were especially passionate collectors. In the ’90s and the aughts were the finance folks, he says.

“I remember telling a friend, ‘Hell will freeze over before people on Wall Street collect contemporary art.’ Well, hell froze over,” Glimcher says. “Each of these communities of wealth, entrepreneurship and innovation has taken its place eventually in support of art and culture. And now it’s Silicon Valley’s turn.”