

# LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

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## Collector Spotlight: Alexander Heller

*By Rebecca Bates*

A young art dealer makes his stamp on the international art market while building a collection of contemporary luminaries.



Art dealer, gallerist, and curator Alexander Heller, in front of an Andy Warhol "Cow" screenprint.





In the living room, a Bruce High Quality Foundation "ATM" sculpture sits on the console table on the far left. Hanging between the windows are photographs by Hassan Hajjaj and Marilyn Minter.

Heller has been building a collection essentially since birth. In lieu of Tonka Trucks or the like, he received a work of art every year on his birthday, and upon entering his teenage years, he discovered the thrill of acquiring and selling works on his own. "When I was 16, I had 16 works of art that were mine. When you're 16 years old and you don't really have anything that's *yours* in the world, that was a big deal," he recalls. "I remember I sold two pieces right when I realized this, and I bought about five more works of art. Then I sold something else, and then I bought another few works of art."

A fire had been lit. From there, Heller says he began collecting "voraciously," bidding at auctions, researching artists, going to every gallery show. Though he'd been attending Art Basel ever since he was a child, when he turned 18 he decided to hit all of the smaller satellite fairs for the first time. "I picked up 10 works of art, all young stuff that I really liked, and that's when I was like, 'Okay, this is a very real thing.'"



A painting by Darius Yekta.



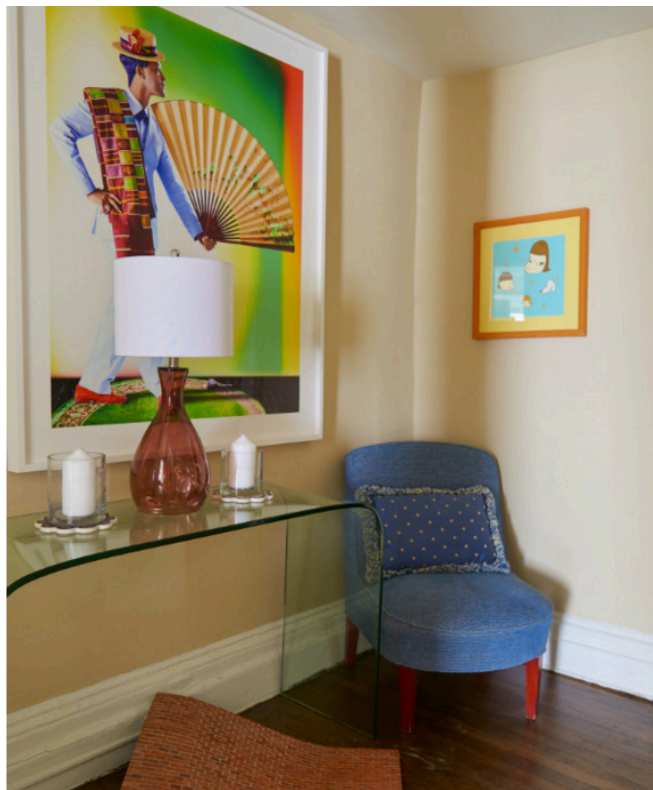
A few years later, while studying for his masters in art history, Heller began trying to navigate how to turn his innate understanding of the contemporary art market into a compelling career. “I went to [University of] St. Andrews [in Scotland], where they teach primarily old masters or Renaissance art,” Heller says. “I was constantly doing everything I could to write about contemporary art. I wrote a lot of essays and took as many classes as I could on things like the role of institutions within the art world, and art theory, not in the context of the art market, but the art world as a decider. I spent a lot of time studying exhibitions.”



In the dining area, from left is a large photograph by Ike Ude and two paintings by Pouran Jinchi.

Even before he had graduated from university and grad school, Heller began taking an active role in the international direction of Leila Heller Gallery. In November of last year, Leila Heller Gallery opened a Dubai outpost, a venture that was spearheaded more by Heller than the gallery’s namesake. Heller first pitched the idea to his mother November 2010, he says, found the perfect space in the fall of 2012, and began working with the Los Angeles-based design firm Charlap Hyman & Herrero to shape the gallery’s interior.

During that time, Heller honed the Dubai gallery’s mission, one that aims to open regional collectors’ minds beyond familiar markets. “The focus is to create a space and program that can properly represent and exhibit the most exciting artists, internationally. A program that’s not catering to the market that exists there right now,” Heller says. “Even if there’s only a handful of collectors in Dubai who want to purchase the artists we show, there’s also a handful of collectors in Qatar who want to purchase them, and a handful of collectors in India, in Azerbaijan, in Lebanon. So we look at our gallery as a Middle Eastern location, not a Dubai-based location. We really do travel around the region, visit our collectors, and that’s how we have to promote our artists. Our artists are not interested in just doing an exhibition in Dubai and selling to people in Dubai. They’re interested in creating a market for their work, and getting into collections across the Middle East.”



From left: A photography by Ude and a print by Yoshitomo Nara.

Stateside, Heller's lent his curatorial expertise to a group exhibition at Leila Heller Gallery's New York space. In "Shrines to Speed," he and co-curator Vivian Brodie present a deft look at how the car's status as a piece of near-religious iconography has long filtered into the visual lexicon of 20th- and 21st-century art and pop culture. The exhibition pulls from nearly 70s years of art history: street scenes photographed by Dennis Hopper and Arthur Leipzig, an Aaron Young's motorcycle canvas, Daniel Arsham's *Obsidian Eroded Shell Sign*, a drawing by Basquiat, and a *Suicide Painting* by Rob Pruitt that evokes the nuanced blue hues of a coastal sky.

"It's such an American sort of thing, this idea of the open road and road trips. The car had so much to do with identity of that kind of lifestyle," Heller reflects. "We went much more West Coast, very ethereal majestic views of driving down the highway by yourself, no other cars, the sun is setting. It's this warming, gorgeous, almost fantasy feeling, which in a sense, is reality in certain parts of America, when it comes to cars. A lot of the imagery fits within that context."



A Minter photograph hangs next to a large work by Peter Sutherland.

At his home in Greenwich Village, Heller likes to think of his collection as an evolving organism. “I treat my collection much more as what I’ve owned over the course of time, not what I own at the moment. I think a lot of dealers can relate to that,” he explains. Still, at the moment Heller owns, he estimates, about 90 works, which he says fall into three categories.

“The first is things that I just find cool, a lot of Richard Prince imagery—cars, cowboys, very macho sort of stuff. Photography is also another big focus of mine, especially black and white and fashion photography. I own a bunch of works by Albert Watson, Marilyn Minter, and these sorts of artists,” Heller says. “The final category is the artists we represent [at the Dubai gallery], which is what I’m collecting mostly now because my blood, sweat, and tears have gone into the project.”

In fact, collecting works by the artists in the Dubai gallery’s roster seems to sum up Heller’s current collecting philosophy (and, he says, was a piece of advice first given to him by Tony Shafrazi): “I think that’s something every dealer really should do. You work so hard to promote these artists, to build markets for them, to create an existence for them within your context, and it almost seems silly to me not to support them yourself. It’s as if you’re doing it half-assed if you’re not going and purchasing work by the artists that you show.”

*For more collector tours, step inside the playful Lower East Side loft of artist Michael Childress and gallerist RJ Supa, explore the astoundingly extensive collection of independent curator and philanthropist Anne Huntington, and hop across the pond for a look at collector Jason Lee’s expert mix of antique design objects and contemporary masterpieces.*