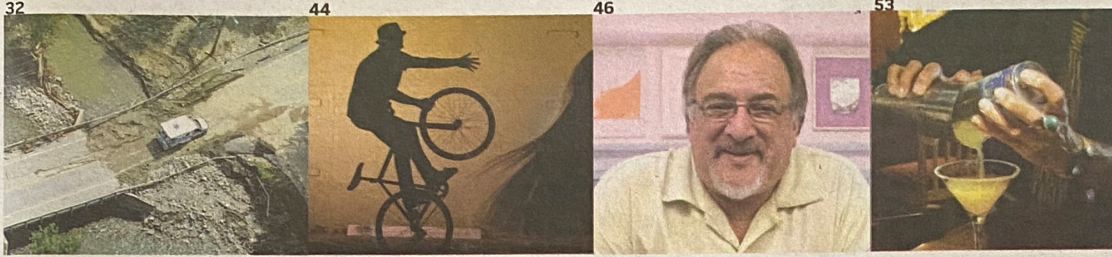


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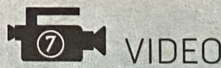
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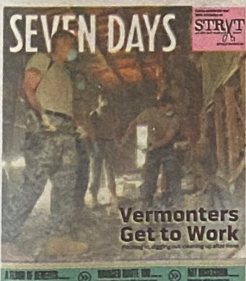
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Passionate Pastime

A Vermont collector reflects on his art acquisitions

BY KEVIN J. KELLEY



Mark Waskow

MATTHEW THORSEN

It would be easy to consider Vermont's most voracious collector of contemporary art a study in stereotypes. Mark Waskow possesses 12,000 pieces of artwork fastidiously crammed into eight storage spaces, and has dreams of building his own museum. He must be a wealthy egomaniac with an anal personality and indiscriminate tastes, right?

Not so fast. Spend time with Waskow, and he emerges as a far more complicated and sympathetic figure. He's funny and brainy, and doesn't conform to the image of either an elegant amasser of expensive objects or a bohemian hoarder of whatever's said to be hip. At 54,

Waskow is casual but conservative in a zip-up vest and a neatly trimmed gray goatee. He looks as though he could be an insurance man. Which is what he was, until he became an independent financial adviser.

"I'm a very organized person," Waskow says with unironic understatement as he sits like a Buddha of the Material World amid hundreds of works hanging on walls, elevated on pedestals, or arranged neatly on tables and in vitrines. Waskow wouldn't like the Buddha comparison, however. Asked to describe his sensibility, he responds, "That minimalist Buddhist aesthetic is something I find very disturbing. I like a maximalist approach to feng shui."

Later, as he conducts a private tour of a portion of his holdings, Waskow elaborates: "I'm drawn to obsessive-compulsive detailing." We're in a roughly 3000-square-foot space in a complex of studios and galleries that will fill with visitors this weekend as Burlington celebrates the 19th annual South End Art Hop. Waskow doesn't want the location specified for security reasons. But, as a longtime board member of the South End Arts and Business Association, which puts on the event, Waskow will be hopping — and looking for more art. He also coordinates the artists shown in the spaces SEABA curates year-round.

One indicator of the magnitude of Waskow's collection — and the fussiness of his space planning — is that it took him and a helper 10 months of 10-hour days to move this collection from an

ART HOP

office on College Street to its current home less than a mile away. Waskow also stows art at six sites in Barre, as well as in the apartment of a friend in Brooklyn. The whole megillah is cross-indexed on ledgers. Waskow seldom needs to consult these files, though, since he not only recalls almost all the titles and artists' names, but often tells a story about how, when and where he came to buy a particular piece.

He pauses in front of "House Cabinet With Vines," a painted wooden construction with hinged doors like those of a Gothic altarpiece. Artist Kim Kulow-Jones was reluctant to sell this piece, Waskow recalls, noting, "Of course, when someone says

that, it makes me want it even more, because it's usually the best thing the artist has done." He finally persuaded her to part with it for what Waskow quantifies as a three-figure sum.

Works inspired by flamingos are abundant in this venue — a result of SEABA's annual "Flamingo Fling" art-auction fundraiser. On the floor under a table, for example, there's a piece called "Duck, Duck, Flamingo," in which the artist has turned a wooden flamingo upside down and put a mallard's head atop this odd duck. It's an amusing, skillfully assembled piece by a local celebrity, not in the art world but in the political arena: Burlington Mayor Bob Kiss.

Waskow speaks with special fondness of a TV tray patterned with cigarettes and matches by Gretchen Whittier, a University of Vermont grad who now works for a landscape architecture firm in San Francisco. His successful auction bid on her "Cigarette Table" started him on the path to becoming Vermont's Lorenzo de'Medici or, closer in time and space, the reincarnation of Electra Havemeyer Webb, founder of the wildly eclectic Shelburne Museum. The momentous moment occurred at the 1998 Art Hop, where the recently divorced Waskow had taken a date. "The evening

was pretty sucky, except for the Art Hop, which was great," he recalls.

Waskow may have been a neophyte rather than an art connoisseur — "I could barely spell 'art' at that time," he says — but he was already a veteran collector. He started with bugs as a little kid in Brooklyn and moved into other categories of objects that many boys collect: rocks, minerals, seashells. At Cornell, where Waskow was captain of the Ultimate Frisbee team, he started collecting plastic discs. He'd also begun gathering World's Fair souvenirs, along with kitsch related to the Statue of Liberty. In a reflection of the job that brought

him to Vermont in 1982, Waskow has in more recent years collected insurance-industry memorabilia.

Anal as can be, right? Maybe, but even an amateur psychoanalyst might recognize there's more to it than that.

"I associate collecting with very pleasurable times," Waskow says, noting that his father often accompanied him on his scavengings. A self-employed handyman, Bernard Waskow died when his only child was 16. Waskow's mother, Irene, was a commercial artist in the Manhattan fashion industry.

Waskow has two children of his own — a 22-year-old son and a 15-year-old daughter — from a marriage that ended in 1997. He lives now in Barre with "life partner" Sue Higby, director of Studio Place Arts.

Although the sheer volume of his acquisitions might suggest otherwise, Waskow will not collect just *anything* an artist is selling. He doesn't like political art, for example — or at least not pieces that "tell you what to think." His collection doesn't contain much digital or video work, partly because "I'm not really into technology," he explains. Nor does he collect photography, or much in

MARK'S AT EVERY OPENING, AT EVERY EVENT; HE SEES EVERYTHING. HE ALSO MEETS EVERY ARTIST HE COLLECTS FROM, WHICH IS SOMETHING RARE FOR A BIG COLLECTOR.

RIC KASINI KADOUR

PASSIONATE PASTIME >> P.48

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- CUARTETO CASALS,** chamber music 10/21
- ST. PETERSBURG STRING QUARTET,**
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- HARRY MANX,** blues guitar, banjo
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violin and cello duo 11/11
- REGINA CARTER'S**
"REVERSE THREAD," jazz
and African roots 11/18
- MOIRA SMILEY AND VOCO,**
holiday program, folk/world music 12/2
- THE ROSE ENSEMBLE,** holiday program 12/9
- ANONYMOUS 4,** vocal ensemble 1/27
- MEKLIT HADERO,** world music and jazz 2/3
- KATE DAVIS,** jazz for Valentine's Day 2/11
- LE VENT DU NORD** and
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Québécois/Cajun 2/17
- MIKE DAISEY,*** *The Agony and the
Ecstasy of Steve Jobs* 2/23-2/25
- MATT HAIMOVITZ,** solo cello 3/2
- FREDERIC CHIU,** piano 3/9
- St. Patrick's Day with **LÚNASA,***
traditional Irish 3/17
- LJOVA AND THE KONTRABAND,**
original klezmer, gypsy,
Eastern European 3/23
- PETER MULVEY,** singer-songwriter 3/30
- VASSILY PRIMA KOV,** piano 4/13
- LES AMIES,** Carol Wincenc, flute;
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FOR NUEVO TANGO** 4/27
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Passionate Pastime « P.47

the manner of typically impressionistic Vermont landscapes.

Waskow clearly favors quirky, funky and sometimes jokey pieces that "show the mark of the artist's hand," he says. His collection includes many works that "are not well crafted but show great originality, great ideas."

Chris Thompson, curator of the BCA Center on Church Street, sees Waskow's collection as "reflective of his personal-

says Fleming Museum director Janie Cohen. "It's been exciting to watch him educate himself to become a dedicated art collector," adds Cohen, who staged a show of Waskow's non-art collections at the Fleming in 1995.

His eye has become more sophisticated since he bought about 60 works within a few weeks of that first Art Hop splurge 13 years ago. "I'm not as easily inspired now," Waskow admits and adds, "I was bad at making critical choices when I started out." Some of those early picks are now consigned to a "Closet of

doing this for the sake of fame. My own importance is not an issue. All of this," he says, gesturing toward the pieces in his Burlington stash, "is not about me. It's about the art and the artists."

But the "Waskowmium"? Isn't that a trifle grandiose?

Its namesake interjects that he's not the coiner of the title. It came from artist Michael Oatman, a friend of Waskow's who began a stellar art career with a 1995 Fleming installation based on a eugenics initiative in Vermont.

Waskow claims he doesn't know



MATTHEW THORSEN

ity and his individual fascinations." The one-third of his pieces that were made in Vermont (the rest were purchased mainly at New York galleries) include the work of well-known locals such as Catherine Hall, Axel Stohlberg, Clark Derbes and Marc Awodey, as well as artists known only to their relatives — and to Waskow. "I want to support artists who really need supporting," Waskow notes.

"He sees value in a work that's often not really obvious," comments Ric Kasini Kadour, an art entrepreneur and gallerist who splits his time between Burlington and Montréal. "Mark's at every opening, at every event; he sees everything. He also meets every artist he collects from, which is something rare for a big collector."

"Passion and intense enthusiasm" are the forces that compel his collecting,

Shame" so that Waskow won't have to look at his mistakes. (He declines to give examples of the closet's contents.)

One day, he hopes, the entire inventory will be housed in the Waskowmium, envisioned as a \$4 million, 30,000-square-foot repository he aims to build somewhere in Vermont. Waskow imagines it as a destination for "the world to see what 'little Vermont' created at one point in history." He adds that he views himself as "a caretaker for the public."

Cohen agrees, suggesting, "what he's ultimately doing is creating a permanent record of art production in Vermont." Kadour adds: "Mark's compiling a document of a community. He's like a needle with an incredibly long thread that's stitching all this work together."

Waskow himself insists, "I'm not

how much he's spent on the art that will eventually be displayed and stored in the Waskowmium. "The vast majority of it cost less than \$100 per piece," he points out. In sum, however, the collection is valued at more than \$1 million, he adds.

But that doesn't mean he's loaded, Waskow contends. "I'm not wealthy; I'm just stupid," he suggests.

"I spend close to 100 percent of my after-tax revenue on art," he reveals, and notes that he drives a 1999 Oldsmobile Bravada and has not bought a suit in more than a decade. "I'm not a trust funder," he declares. "I'm self-employed and work on commission."

Besides, Waskow remarks, money is useful only as a means toward happiness. It's allowed him to collect art, and, he says, "Art is the best thing that's ever happened to me." ⑦