

## Buyers' Market

As the cultural landscape of San Francisco evolves, tech's rising stars decode the art world



One blustery February evening in San Francisco, Jessica Silverman opened her Tenderloin gallery doors to introduce art lovers to Hayal Ponzanti's serif- and statistics-based paintings and sculptures. While well-heeled art patrons in black swished in and out of the high-windowed gallery and admired the Turkish artist, a few blocks away, engineers and their ilk were exiting the headquarters of Twitter, Square and Zendesk.

In San Francisco, art, commerce, technology, the anti-establishment, new money and old are all colliding as the city undergoes a massive cultural

shift. Parts of downtown are being leveled and rebuilt sky-high to create the Salesforce Tower (the soon-to-be tallest building in San Francisco), and hot startups are setting down their stakes just south of Market.

The city is filled with traffic and decamped young people from Harvard and MIT, and, of course, new Stanford grads who immediately move 35 miles north. Where art fits into this new equation is still being defined. "There's a lot of contentiousness between art and tech and the city because of the sensibility that tech is taking over," says Michelle Mansour, executive director of Root >>

Work by Hayal Ponzanti surrounds Jessica Silverman in her gallery.

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>> Division, a San Francisco nonprofit that subsidizes studio space for artists, and offers adult classes and after-school programs. “But tech people are problem solvers, and artists are problem solvers—we actually operate in a similar circle.”

Silverman has sold to many more tech collectors in the past year-and-a-half since moving her gallery near the reviving Mid-Market area, which also counts Spotify and Yammer in the general vicinity. She is considered a go-to for

**ABOVE** John Hering co-founded Lookout right out of college with two friends from USC. **BELOW LEFT** Sean Raspet’s *Hydrocarbon Reformulations* attract the kind of collectors “who go home and think about a piece before they buy,” says Silverman.

those in the international art scene and recently showed for the first time in the main fair at Art Basel Miami. According to her and others, young tech entrepreneurs do collect, but they do it the same way they build companies: by looking for maximum

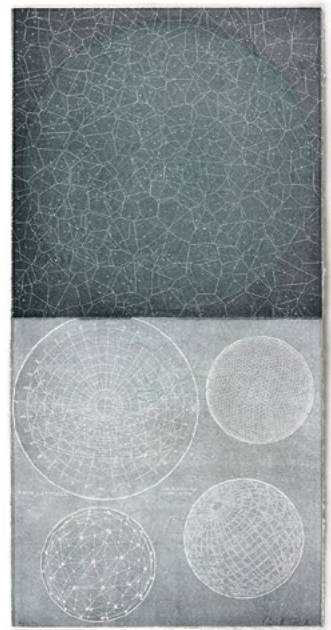
impact and making unique, thoughtful, trailblazing choices.

“A lot of them are coming into money very quickly and are buying these houses where they are confronted with a lot of white walls,” notes Silverman. Many are also notoriously shy and private, classic introverts.

“Historically, I would sell to S.F. collectors at art fairs in another city,” she says. She’d see interior designers such as Douglas Durkin and Steven Volpe come in to purchase art, but rarely the actual collectors. That’s changing: At Art Basel Miami, Instagram co-founders Mike Krieger and Kevin Systrom led a panel on Instagram and art, and were seen shopping the stalls—rumor has it one bought a Turrell; One Kings Lane co-founder Alison Pincus was spotted at the Marian Goodman booth; and young technologists from the likes of Facebook and Pinterest roamed the various venues.

Many established people in tech have already been collecting blue-chip art for quite some time. Jeff Bezos was among the guests at the John Currin dinner with Larry Gagosian in February; Yahoo co-founder Jerry Yang’s calligraphy collection has been displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, CEO Marissa Mayer keeps Jeff Koons balloon dogs in her kitchen; entrepreneur Trevor Traina’s encyclopedic photography collection includes pieces by Diane Arbus, Weegee and Gursky; and Pamela and Richard Kramlich have a video art collection—think Matthew Barney and Steve McQueen—so encompassing and famous it appeals to people outside the traditional art sphere (word on the street is that Kanye West stopped by for a tour).

As the newcomers dip their toes in the market, they are making unconventional choices: “For



**ABOVE** *FLOW #9*, 2014, by Carrie Ann Plank. Collector Adam O’Donnell calls her work “data dense.” **BELOW RIGHT** O’Donnell at home in front of a vintage Muni bus scroll.

me, the tech community is very interested in visual experimentation,” says Silverman. “They inquire about the conceptually rigorous and sometimes less trendy—they don’t always want the major artists that everyone else wants.”

Los Angeles-based Sean Raspet and Canadian artist Ian Wallace are two such targets. At Raspet’s last show at Société in Berlin, the self-taught scientist-cum-artist reformulated Coca-Cola’s soft drink formula into its chemical mirror image, and tried to remake Coke and Pepsi without the color. Equally intellectual, Wallace’s work juxtaposes painting and photography and is highly conceptual. “Tech collectors are not looking at art as a form of social climbing and very much not into ‘flipping,’” Silverman adds, “which is why San Francisco is poised as one of the best collecting communities in the world.”

Certainly, some tech collectors who spoke off the record approach art as an investment, and enjoy the Wild West aspect of the market, which careens to the same supernatural extremes as the tech industry. Others admitted that they like the social currency: When in St. Barts or in >>



<< Cannes, they want to be able to engage in the watercooler conversation that surrounds them.

Still others take a more authentic approach. John Hering, 31, co-founder of the mobile security company Lookout, explains his attraction to art philosophically: "Technology is supposed to be a tool for us to do things, but we are becoming more and more a tool for technology. Now art and radical expression become introspection for us—people who are not expressing themselves. As these concepts compound, art plays a critical role in maintaining our humanity."

Hering, who grew up with relatives who were artists and a mother who is a designer, collects street art and modern exclusively, citing his youth in large cities as one of his motivators. He's decorated his homes with works by well-known artists such as Banksy alongside emerging artists Conor Harrington and Marina Molares. He plans to donate his collection to charity.

Adam O'Donnell, 36, founded his own company and now works at Cisco as a principal engineer, and has a similarly noneconomic approach to collecting. On weekends, he trawls open studios in Hunters Point (a former Superfund site) or Point Reyes, looking for local work that makes him "feel something." He prefers to buy at auctions, deeming fairs overpriced and too much about the money. One of his favorite artists, Carrie Ann Plank, relies on data for "infographic-y" results. A beloved piece by Miró in O'Donnell's house evokes the concept of surveillance, which makes him think of his hacker days. Deciding that collecting personally wasn't enough, O'Donnell's latest step was to join the board of Root Division because he wants arts to be accessible to everyone.

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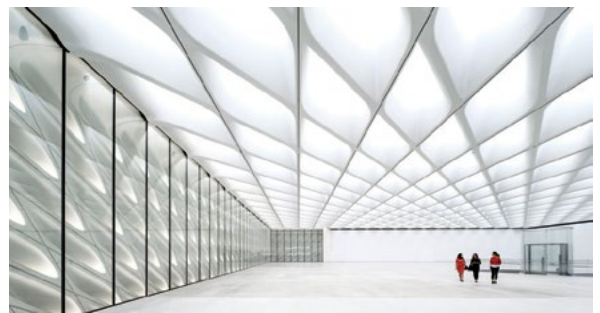
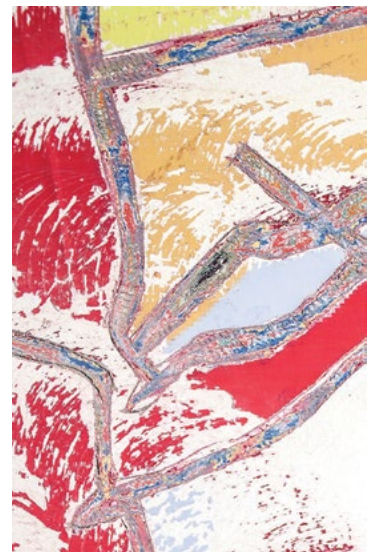
## In Focus

Counting down California's most exciting cultural happenings in 2015

**A**t the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, "**Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui**" sheds light on the Golden State's growing commitment to international art with metal and wood topographical pieces by the Ghanaian sculptor (through June 28). The GAP's founders, Doris and Donald Fisher, share their collection of contemporary treasures for "**American Icons: Masterworks from SFMOMA and the Fisher Collection**" at the Grand Palais in Paris (April 8-June 22). Meanwhile, **LACMA's 50th Anniversary** spring gala festivities (April 18) include an exhibition of birthday gifts for the museum from major collectors: Jane and Marc Nathanson (p.96) have donated pieces by Lichtenstein, Rosenquist and Warhol, among others, for "**50 for 50: Gifts on the Occasion of LACMA's 50th Anniversary**" (April 26).

At UCLA, Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler's film *River of Fundament* debuts on the West Coast, reimagining Norman Mailer's novel *Ancient Evenings*, with performances by Paul Giamatti and Maggie Gyllenhaal (April 25). If you miss the flick, the corresponding exhibition of sculptures, photographs and vitrines inspired by the film hits MOCA later this year (Sept. 13-January 2016). **Startup Art Fair**, in San Francisco, takes a disruptive approach to the art fair, giving unrepresented artists a chance to show their stuff (May 1-3). "**Portraits and Other Likenesses From SFMOMA**" at the Museum of the African Diaspora emphasizes the museum's increasing international scope as it showcases figurative art influenced by Africa, the U.S., Europe and beyond (May 8-Oct. 11). At the Orange County Museum of Art, multimedia show >>

**FROM TOP** A production image for "Scorched Earth" by Mark Bradford. The new Broad Museum. Andy Warhol's *Liz #6* will be on view in Paris. Corita Kent's silkscreen print *harnesses the sun*, 1967, on view at Pasadena Museum of Art this summer.



BRADFORD: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH, LONDON. BROAD MUSEUM: HUFTON + CROW. LIZ #6: BEN BLACKWELL. HARNESSES THE SUN: ARTHUR EVANS, COURTESY OF THE TANG MUSEUM AT SKIDMORE COLLEGE

## BUYERS' MARKET

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"These are philanthropic intellectuals," Silverman explains. Many are in a position to contribute to the museums of the future. "It's about building strong relationships: with the art, the artists, the galleries and museums. Many have good guidance with advisers that allows them to set the groundwork for long-term collecting."

And O'Donnell thinks that the number of people with technical backgrounds who become collectors will only keep growing. "I think that through a math and science background, you have an appreciation for aesthetics," he says. "And people yearn for art in a way. Look at how many people buy Apple products."

After all, Steve Jobs was the one who declared technology alone was "never enough." Only when paired with the arts and humanities does it "sing." •

## SEEING IS BELIEVING

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gardens with dirt from Aaron Spelling's construction project down the block. A second renovation a decade ago created the downstairs gallery. The result is a Mediterranean-style exterior with a minimalist, monochromatic interior that doubles as a showcase for their extensive, and changeable, holdings. (When they bought the residence, a friend told them it was included in a book of great homes in L.A. Nathanson tracked down the publication and discovered it was titled *Bastardized Houses in Los Angeles*.)

The Nathansons are also devoted to sharing art, which is why Jane, who co-founded MOCA and is currently on the board of LACMA, is co-chairing the museum's sold-out April 18 gala along with fellow LACMA trustees Ann Colgin and Lynda Resnick. She and Resnick are also chairing the campaign to encourage promised gifts of art to commemorate LACMA's 50th anniversary—because, in Jane's rhetorical words: "What do you give a museum for its birthday?" At the gala, the resulting exhibit, "50 for 50: Gifts on the Occasion of LACMA's 50th Anniversary," will be revealed.

Jane lights up when she talks about the institution. "It's my big passion now," she says. "I really feel it's becoming the city center. Museums are like churches or temples: Anyone can go and have a Zen experience or an exciting experience or any kind of experience you want. You don't have to look a certain way or believe in anything."

The Nathansons have announced the promise of eight works to LACMA, many of which will be part of the exhibit (open to the public April 26), including Warhol's *Two Marilyns*, Rosenquist's *Portrait of the Scull Family*, George Segal's *Laundromat* and Lichtenstein's *Interior With Three Hanging Lamps*.

"I really believe the best place for a piece of art to be is in a museum where future generations can enjoy it," Jane says, echoing the message of a piece in her upstairs gallery by Barbara Kruger: *The Future Belongs to Those Who Can See It*. •

## STAGE PRESENCE

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**DB: Which pieces from your parents' collection stand out for you the most?**

**AC:** The portraits of them at home—my dad by Jean-Michel Basquiat and my mom by Julian Schnabel—are both such beautiful pieces; I just feel a connection to them.

**DB: I know one way that you practice your own art is music. What instruments do you play and when did you start playing?**

**AC:** I started playing guitar in high school, but what I most love is singing. Lately, I've been more focused on singing, writing and recording.

**DB: How would you classify your sound?**

**AC:** It's difficult to say what genre it is. I'm in a place of experimentation right now; in high school I was such an avid rock listener, and in the past three years, my music appreciation has expanded to so much more than that. Many of the musicians that I admire today draw from so many different influences, and don't really stick to just one genre, so that's what I aspire to do too.

**DB: What are you listening to now?**

**AC:** Right now, I'm all about Glenn Gould.

Besides that, I've been listening to quite a bit of jazz.

**DB: I've always been very jealous of people who are musically inclined. When I was in school, I played the trumpet and I was terrible! But maybe that's why I can appreciate music in a different way, because I don't understand it as well.**

**AC:** That's definitely a valid point. In more recent years, I've started to listen to music in a different way. Sometimes I catch myself listening a lot more actively than before. I think it's probably because I've started to take writing more seriously and like to analyze other people's music to see what's going on.

**DB: That's a much different experience than mine. To quote Taylor Swift, I'm just looking for a "sick beat."**

**AC:** Ha! The first thing that attracts me to anything is that it has to be emotionally compelling.

**DB: How do you find inspiration for your music?**

**AC:** Sometimes I just find inspiration randomly and then will try to write something. A lot of the time, though, writing is more like a ritual. I tell myself I have to get something done today and I try to get it done. It's practicing, just like you would do with anything else. I've also been trying to rethink the way I approach songwriting, so instead of starting with just a melody, or harmony, or lyrics, I think of it more experimentally. I've been thinking more in terms of how recording—which requires an entirely different set of techniques— informs writing. I might approach a new program, or think of new sounds that I like aesthetically, and start with that.

**DB: Is there a song that you think sums you up?**

**AC:** I will say that I'd aspire for my daily theme song to be "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'" by the Supremes. I love the way Diana Ross delivers it, and just conveys this feminine confidence, which I think every woman should have.

**DB: How does fashion influence you?**

**AC:** Fashion is an everyday way people can express themselves—just by what they chose to wear—so it can be an everyday micro-influence for me, and when I look at a great editorial, it's a grander, more fantastical kind of inspiration.

**DB: What do you miss most about L.A.?**

**AC:** Listening to music in the car. •