

How to Throw a Dinner Party Like a Gallerist

Written by Anna Furman

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Silverman with the artist Dashiell Manley, in front of one of his paintings.
Credit: Aya Brackett

"It was love at first sight," said the writer Sarah Thornton, of meeting the gallerist Jessica Silverman at an art fair in London nine years ago. "Her stand was so confidently curated." Now happily partnered, they live in an eighth-floor apartment in San Francisco's historic Nob Hill neighborhood — facing Grace Cathedral's stained-glass rosette windows and Coit Tower. "We loved the era of the building being the early '60s because it fit with our aesthetics around design and furniture," said Silverman. Jewel-toned Milo Baughman armchairs and playful midcentury modern accents (acrylic chairs, a chunky Lucite vase) lend the couple's living room a warm, joyful mood. "I'm not into the monochrome beige home," Thornton explains. "For me, that would feel like purgatory."

Since moving to Nob Hill five years ago, Silverman has lived within walking distance of her eponymous gallery; and over the past 12 years, she has carved out a name for herself as a bold, ambitious art dealer with a unique ability to identify promising emerging artists, particularly those on the West Coast. Her keen knowledge of the contemporary art landscape and omnivorous aesthetic interests are reflected in the gallery's wide-ranging program, which includes the boundary-pushing sculptor Davina Semo, the figurative painter Conrad Egyir and the experimental filmmaker Isaac Julien.

On a brisk night in January, Silverman and Thornton gathered a small group of friends at their home to toast the Los Angeles-based artist Dashiell Manley before his exhibition of prismatic paintings opened at Silverman's gallery. Manley and his wife Vanessa mingled with the Bay Area sculptor Woody De Othello, the collector Akio Tagawa, the curator Kim Nguyen and the

collectors Kaitlyn and Mike Krieger (the latter co-founded Instagram). Before dinner, guests grazed on spiced florets of romanesco and briny Beau Soleil oysters garnished with wild onion flowers.



"Finding an apartment with good gallery walls was very key for us," Silverman said. In the living room is a neon-orange chain installation by the San Francisco-based artist Davina Semo and an aluminum print by the artist Hugh Scott Douglas.

Credit: Aya Brackett

For the meal itself, the chef Leif Hedendal, who trained at Noma in Copenhagen, planned a series of intricate, garden-inspired dishes, starting with a Dungeness crab and ikura salad with root vegetables and a rainbow of calendula, nasturtium and chickweed flowers. Between bites, Silverman told me, "Leif is really like working with an artist. You never know quite what you're going to get, and there's a bit of trust, but everything comes out amazing." The main course included delicately roasted duck leg with kabocha squash and saffron milk caps foraged from the Santa Cruz Mountains, followed by a hearty matsutake congee spiced with fresh habanero.

Conversations swirled around guests' varying spice tolerances, an art fair in New Orleans, the Manleys' newborn child and Othello's coming residency at Wisconsin's John Michael Kohler Arts Center. The cross-generational group was typical for Silverman and Thornton, who have befriended a wide swathe of people in the Bay Area art scene. "If we invited only artists or all collectors, it'd be too much shoptalk, too insider-y," said Thornton. "By mixing all the roles in the art world, it feels more open."

The couple's white, woolly dog, Bear, roamed the kitchen floor looking for scraps, and their tabby cat, Bird, crawled atop a plexiglass-enclosed zebra skull sculpture by the Detroit-based artist Matthew Angelo Harrison. "She is desperate to get inside to chew that bone," Thornton said with a laugh.



After dinner, guests drank Massa Vecchia's Passito Rosso, a Tuscan dessert wine made of oak-aged Aleatico grapes.
Credit: Aya Brackett

Later, shot glasses were presented and we washed down the meal with Massa Vecchia's Passito Rosso, a Tuscan dessert wine made with oak-aged Aleatico grapes. "I feel at home with my friends," Thornton said of the couple's art collection. "We know every artist in the house personally, except for the dead ones." (Among the deceased are Eadweard Muybridge and Edward Kienholz.) Later that night we walked through the collection; Manley's meditative paintings patterned with scalloped impasto strokes brightened up the couple's bedroom, and a color-blocked painting of a bird by the artist Clare Rojas, a Christmas gift from Silverman to Thornton, flanked the doorway. As guests retrieved their coats, Thornton told me, "Gallerists like Jess are the middlemen of the art world. They're the connectors, the hub that bring everyone together." Here, Silverman and Thornton share their tips for a laid-back but colorful dinner party.



For hors d'oeuvres, guests were served spiced chunks of romanesco.
Credit: Aya Brackett



A salad of Dungeness crab, ikura, various root vegetables and a rainbow of calendula, nasturtium and chickweed flowers.
Credit: Aya Brackett

Serve Food That Feels Special, But Not Overly Precious

"We don't do stuffy," Silverman said of asking Hedendal to create a meal centered on natural ingredients. "No fussy food," Thornton echoed. "I don't like that old-fashioned nouvelle food where everything's a pastry and, like, overly coifed." Indeed, the earthy dishes embraced wild ingredients and evoked miniature landscapes. For dessert, for example, Hedendal served a small mound of homemade yogurt and whipped cream sprinkled with halved Barhi dates, coyote mint, dried cherry, kiwi, delicate segments of oroblanco grapefruit and blood orange, all bathed in chestnut honey. Bright blue and yellow wildflowers laced the edges.



Silverman (at left) and Thornton (at right) have lived in their Nob Hill apartment since 2015.
Credit: Aya Brackett

Choose Joyful Flowers (and Consider Sustainability)

In keeping with the floral theme of Hedendal's dishes, Thornton decorated the couple's home with orange roses. On the dinner table were small bunches of flowers in earthenware vases by the Bay Area ceramist Zoe Dering; in the living room, a single rose stood within a Lucite block vase by the Japanese designer Shiro Kuramata. The couple are mindful of sustainable options too, and typically decorate with succulents and ferns – or orchids, which can live longer than other cut flowers.



Thornton decorated the table with tea lights, orange roses in earthenware vases by the Bay Area ceramist Zoe Dering and napkins printed with Judy Chicago's prismatic paintings.
Credit: Aya Brackett



Fresh mandarins piled onto a handmade ceramic dish.
Credit: Aya Brackett

Embrace Bold, Unusual Napkins

To add color and personality to the table, Thornton selected cloth napkins emblazoned with the artist Judy Chicago's rainbow-colored paintings. "We love a good napkin," said Silverman, whose gallery represents Chicago.



Chrome Milo Baughman chairs surround the dining table, which faces the stained-glass rosette windows of San Francisco's historic Grace Cathedral.
Credit: Aya Brackett

Create Space for Conversation

"The worst thing to me is a high candle – or, like, a candelabra," said Thornton. "Everybody has to be able to make eye contact." To open up conversation and encourage mingling among their guests, the couple ensured that neither candles nor bouquets could obstruct guests' eye line. Instead, low tea candles and bud vases created a sense of ease.



From left: the curator Kim Nguyen, Silverman, the sculptor Woody De Othello, the collector Akio Tagawa, the artist Dashiell Manley and his wife, Vanessa.
Credit: Aya Brackett

Be Transparent About the Guest List

"I have a fair amount of social anxiety," said Thornton. "So I don't bcc the list of invited guests like it's a mystery. I'd rather be transparent and assuage others' anxieties about who is coming. Sometimes just knowing one person on the list is reassuring." To make everyone feel welcome, Silverman and Thornton often bring together a group of people that share more than one thing in common. "There's art and maybe a generational thing, or that two guests are new parents. Maybe two people are from Detroit or Chicago," said Thornton, "It feels obvious, but a bit of thought goes a long way – it just makes the points of contact easier."