

# whitewall

"Inside the Collection: How Jessica Silverman and Sarah Thornton Live with Art"

By Katy Donoghue

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Based in San Francisco, gallerist Jessica Silverman and writer-sociologist Sarah Thornton have built a collection rooted in art-historical relevance, feminist inquiry, and enduring beauty.

For **Jessica Silverman** and **Sarah Thornton**, collecting is not an accessory to their professional lives—it is a way of thinking, living, and looking. Based in **San Francisco**, the couple has been collecting together for more than a decade, shaping a home and worldview defined by works that are, in their words, “art historically relevant, often feminist, always beautiful and innovative.” Their collection reflects a shared commitment to artists whose practices challenge convention while remaining visually and materially compelling.

One of their most recent acquisitions, **Lari Pittman’s** *Untitled #4* (2007), now hangs in their living room. The painting—alive with distinctive color, layered motifs, and virtuoso technique—features a hot air balloon that doubles as a light bulb alongside a double question mark. For Silverman and Thornton, the work evokes floating, travel, investigation, and moments of epiphany—an emblem of how art can spark both intellectual curiosity and emotional resonance.

That duality has guided their collecting since the beginning, starting with **Talia Chetrit’s** *Vagina Vase* in 2011, a work that signaled their early interest in feminist perspectives and boundary-pushing form. Whether engaging with museums, galleries, or art fairs, they approach collecting as an ongoing education—one shaped by close looking, conversation, and a deep belief in art’s capacity to illuminate the world around us.

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Left: Jessica Silverman and Sarah Thornton attend CCA's 2025 Gala Celebrating the Honorable Willie L. Brown, Jr. on May 21st 2025 at California College of The Arts in San Francisco, CA (Photo - Jessica Monroy for Drew Altizer Photography). Courtesy of Jessica Silverman.

Right: © Henrik Kam, courtesy of Jessica Silverman.

**WHITEWALL:** Can you share a recent acquisition you're excited about?

**SARAH THORNTON & JESSICA SILVERMAN:** We're excited about our new **Lari Pittman** painting. Pittman will be featured in an upcoming group show at our gallery called "*Beauty is the Best Defense.*" The Columbia-American artist is an extraordinary painter, whose work is full of engaging motifs, virtuoso techniques, and distinctive colors. Our painting, which hangs in the living room, features a hot air balloon that looks like a light bulb and a double question mark. When we gaze at it, we think of floating, travel, investigations, and epiphanies.

*"Our collection is art historically relevant, often feminist, always beautiful and innovative."*

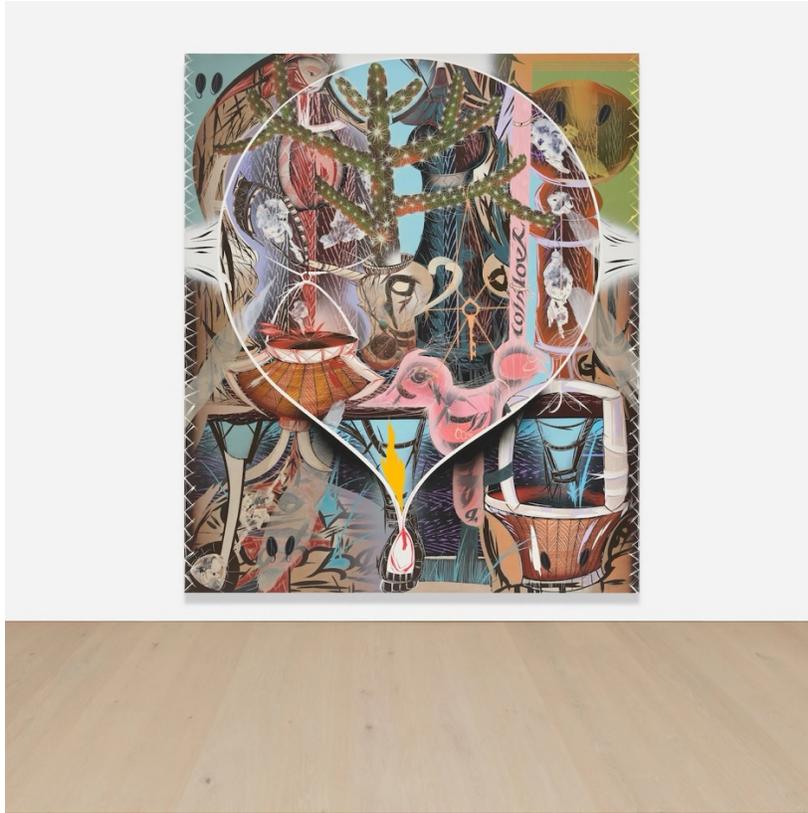
**Jessica Silverman and Sarah Thornton**

**WW:** What is your advice for aspiring collectors just getting started?

**ST & JS:** Look carefully at as much as possible. Go to museums, galleries, and art fairs—**FOG Design + Art** is coming up in **San Francisco**, so pop by. Engage with artists, curators, dealers, and other collectors. Read Sarah's classics that give you the lay of the land: *Seven Days in the Art World* and *33 Artists in 3 Acts*.

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Lari Pittman, "Untitled #4," 2007, Acrylic, Cel-Vinyl and aerosol lacquer on gessoed canvas over wood panel, 102 x 86 inches / 259.1 x 218.4 cm. Courtesy of Jessica Silverman.

**WW: What are you looking forward to most at FOG?**

**ST & JS:** Our booth, "Out of the Blue." This curated exhibition brings together gallery artists whose works investigate the material reality, psychology, and metaphysics of the color blue. Long associated with the infinite expanses of sky and sea, blue carries a wide emotional and symbolic range—from serenity and spiritual ascent to melancholy, honesty, and devotion. We're also excited to attend the talks of **Trevor Paglen** and **Lava Thomas** on Sunday, January 25.

*"Collecting is about looking carefully—at museums, galleries, fairs, and the world around you."*

**WW: What exhibitions in San Francisco won't you miss?**

**ST & JS:** **Rose B. Simpson** has monumental works at both the **de Young Museum** and **SFMOMA**. The works are so different; seeing both is a great way to appreciate the phenomenal range of her unique voice. **Rebecca Manson** has a breakthrough solo show at **Jessica Silverman Gallery**, featuring ceramic freestanding sculptures and wall works made with 50,000 different glazes that often take the form of butterfly wings. In our smaller space, we also have a greatest-hits exhibition of **Trevor Paglen**, featuring new works from the established series that have made him the legend he is today.

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"Our artists are like children; we can't pick favorites."

Jessica Silverman and Sarah Thornton

**WW: Who is the artist you're most excited about right now?**

**ST & JS:** Our artists are like children—we can't pick favorites. Sarah is going to write the press release for "*Beauty is the Best Defense*" (lucky for the artists in the show). We're both super-excited that it includes **Grayson Perry, Ilana Savdie, Tishan Hsu**, and, as we already mentioned, Lari.

Sarah Thornton & Jessica Silverman Collection Snapshot

**Collectors:** Sarah Thornton & Jessica Silverman.

**Based in:** San Francisco, California.

**Collecting together since:** Over a decade.

**First acquisition:** *Vagina Vase* (2011) by **Talia Chetrit**.

**Most recent acquisition:** *Untitled #4* (2007) by **Lari Pittman**.

**How they describe their collection:** Art historically relevant, often feminist, always beautiful and innovative.

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