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When the Artist-Patron Relationship Becomes Friendly

Collectors buy the work of a living artist in depth, and those transactions sometimes can sow the seeds of a friendship.

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The multidisciplinary maker Adam Pendleton, center. He appreciated his friendship with the Philadelphia collectors Michael Forman, right, and Jennifer Rice, founders of the Forman Arts Initiative. They are now among the biggest collectors of his work. Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. for The New York Times



By Ted Loos

Dec. 5, 2023

Collectors and artists are involved in a financial transaction: Money changes hands for an artwork, usually through a third party like a dealer. There is no requirement for the two parties to know each other, or even meet.

But art — arbitrary, personal and passion-fueled — sometimes brings the two parties together in ways they did not expect, especially when collectors buy the work of a living artist in depth.

When friendships develop, modern-day Medicis have a chance to engage in the creative life, and artists get steady patrons who can make them feel better understood. The art may even grow as a result.

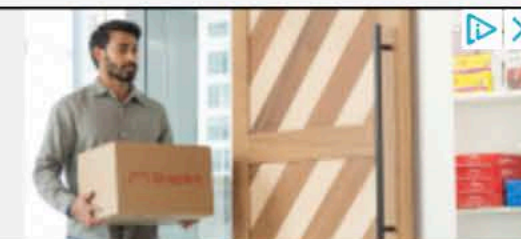
“I’m not a social person,” said the artist Roni Horn, who makes everything from cast-glass sculptures to inkjet-printed photographs. “I don’t have people over to the studio.”

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And yet, Ms. Horn, who works in New York City and Maine, has ended up as “extremely close” friends with the collectors Mitchell P. Rales and Emily Wei Rales, founders of Glenstone, a museum in Potomac, Md.





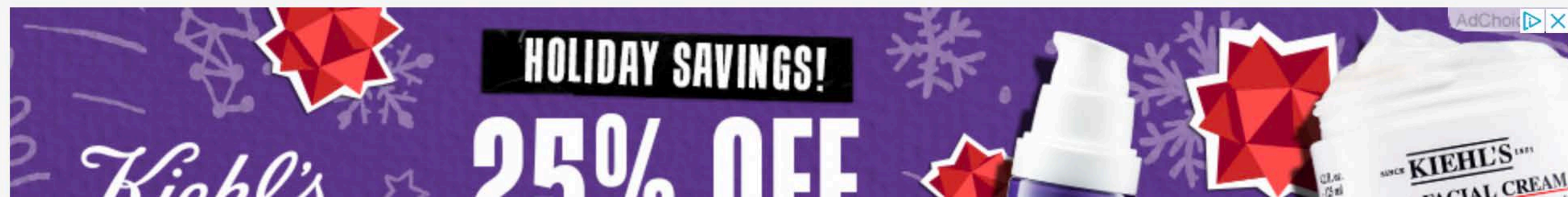
“Water Double, v. 3” (2013-15) by Roni Horn at Glenstone, a museum in Potomac, Md. The artist and Glenstone Museum; photo by Ron Amstutz

Bonding happened during years of the couple’s collecting and organizing the Glenstone [exhibition](#) of Ms. Horn’s work that opened in 2017, and now they have summertime “sundowner” cocktails on a regular basis at their homes in Maine, which are near each other.

The couple has bought more than 40 works by Ms. Horn for Glenstone, said Ms. Rales, the museum’s director. Those pieces include the sculpture “Water Double, v. 3” (2013-15), on view now.

Becoming friends was a surprise to them, too. “The chemistry has to be there,” Ms. Rales said. “There are amazing artists that I admire, but we don’t have chemistry.”

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Sometimes the chance to have chemistry never arrives.

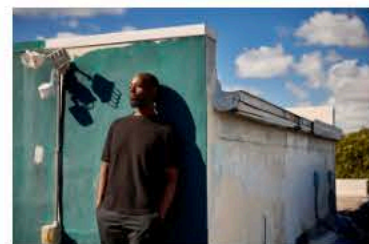
“We have a lot of work by David Hammons, but I’ve only met him once or twice,” Ms. Rales said of the famously [elusive](#) artist, adding, “I’m lucky to have even met him.”

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Mel Bochner, the New York artist perhaps best known for his “Blah Blah Blah” series of text artworks, does not always seek too much blah-blah with the collectors of his work.

When the collector Jill Kraus cold-called Mr. Bochner more than 20 years ago, hoping to get him to design a sculpture garden at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, where she was on the board, the artist avoided calling back as long as possible.

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“I was thinking, ‘How am I going to get rid of this person?’” said Mr. Bochner, a Carnegie Mellon alumnus who had no interest or experience in making such spaces.

But he eventually relented and designed the university’s Kraus Campo, working with the landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh, completing the space in 2005.



“It turned out to be one of the most gratifying projects I’ve ever been involved with,” Mr. Bochner said. (Collectors interested in him will find two of his works at Art Basel Miami Beach this week in the booth of Peter Freeman, Inc.)

Ms. Kraus and her husband, Peter, are based in New York City and the Hudson Valley, with an overall trove of more than 1,200 artworks. They have avidly collected Mr. Bochner’s work, and become close to him.

His initial reluctance to be in touch “has become a running joke” between them, said Ms. Kraus, a trustee of the Museum of Modern Art. He has given them works as birthday gifts, and even designed 10 windows in their Dutchess County, N.Y., home, which are themselves artworks, covered with rows of translucent numbers.



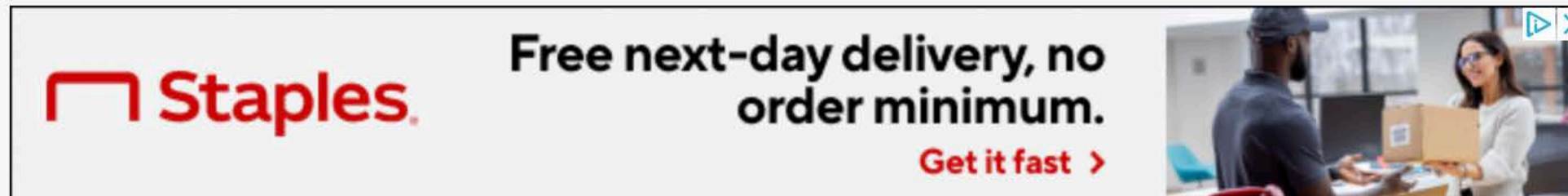


“L’Arte unisce le generazioni - Art unites the generations - Robert and Sylvia Olnick” (2022), by Michelangelo Pistoletto at Magazzino, a museum in Cold Spring, N.Y. Lauren Silberman, via Magazzino Italian Art

For Nancy Olnick, who founded the museum Magazzino with her husband, Giorgio Spanu, her friendship with the noted Italian artist [Michelangelo Pistoletto](#) led to a meaningful commission depicting her parents: “L’Arte unisce le generazioni - Art unites the generations - Robert and Sylvia Olnick” (2022).

The work, part of Mr. Pistoletto’s ongoing, well-known “Mirror Paintings” series, sits in the lobby of Magazzino in Cold Spring, N.Y., some 55 miles north of New York City. The museum specializes in postwar Italian art, and the collection includes about a dozen pieces by Mr. Pistoletto, who is 90.

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“We’ve been very lucky,” Ms. Olnick said. “We’re collecting Italian artists, and Italians are, for the most part, warm and friendly. We have no problem connecting.”

She added, “We’re passionate people. People are probably more important to us than the art.”

For their part, as artists get more successful, they face increasing demands, and they can be protective of their privacy and schedule. “Time is so precious,” as Ms. Horn, the artist prominently featured at Glenstone, put it.

“Artists are very busy, and some people understand that,” said the multidisciplinary maker Adam Pendleton, who lives in New York and is best known for his abstract black-and-white paintings dealing with race and history. “We run a business. Then you have to gear shift and make the painting.”

Mr. Pendleton said he appreciated his friendship with the Philadelphia collectors Michael Forman and Jennifer Rice, founders of the [Forman Arts Initiative](#), who are now among the biggest collectors of his work.



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Mr. Pendleton is advising the couple on a planned space for the Forman Arts Initiative that would host community programming and show some of their collection. Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. for The New York Times

“Their generosity toward me has been immense — not just collecting but also supporting my initiatives, like the Nina Simone house,” Mr. Pendleton said. He and three other artists have been working to [preserve](#) the singer’s childhood home in North Carolina.

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But he also likes the couple's sense of boundaries. "I appreciate them because their expectations of me are not demanding," Mr. Pendleton said, adding, "I don't go on vacations with them."

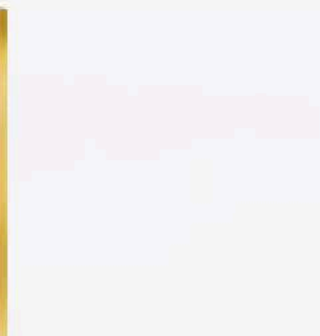
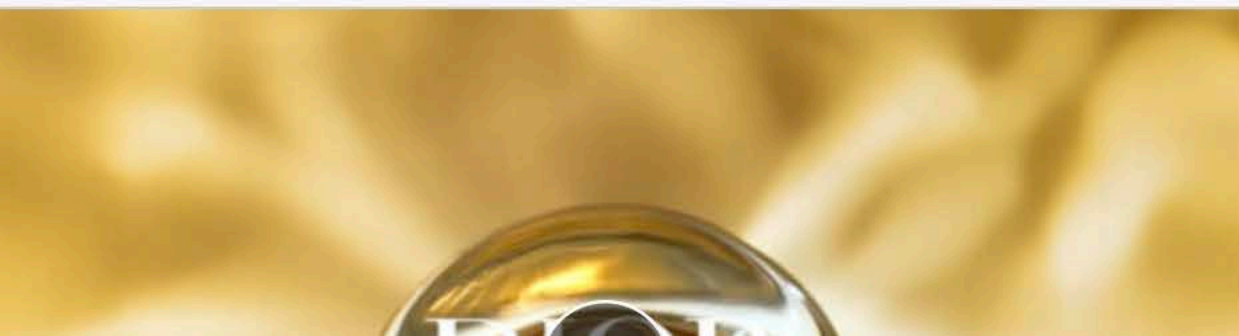
Mr. Forman characterized their "strong relationship" in a similar way: "between professional and buddies."

The support Mr. Pendleton cited goes both ways. The artist is advising the couple on a planned space for the Forman Arts Initiative that would host community programming and show some of their collection.

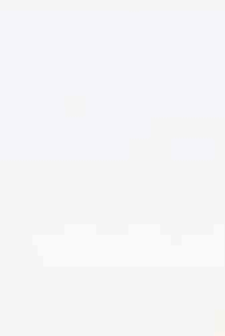
"Part of the job for us is getting to know the artists," Mr. Forman said of his collecting. "The art world is small, and you're going to run into people."

The issue of expectations on the part of patrons can be tricky: Does their buying entitle them to more than just the art? Ms. Rales, of Glenstone, referred to it as one of the "danger zones" that can crop up. "You know when you're hitting that invisible line," she said.

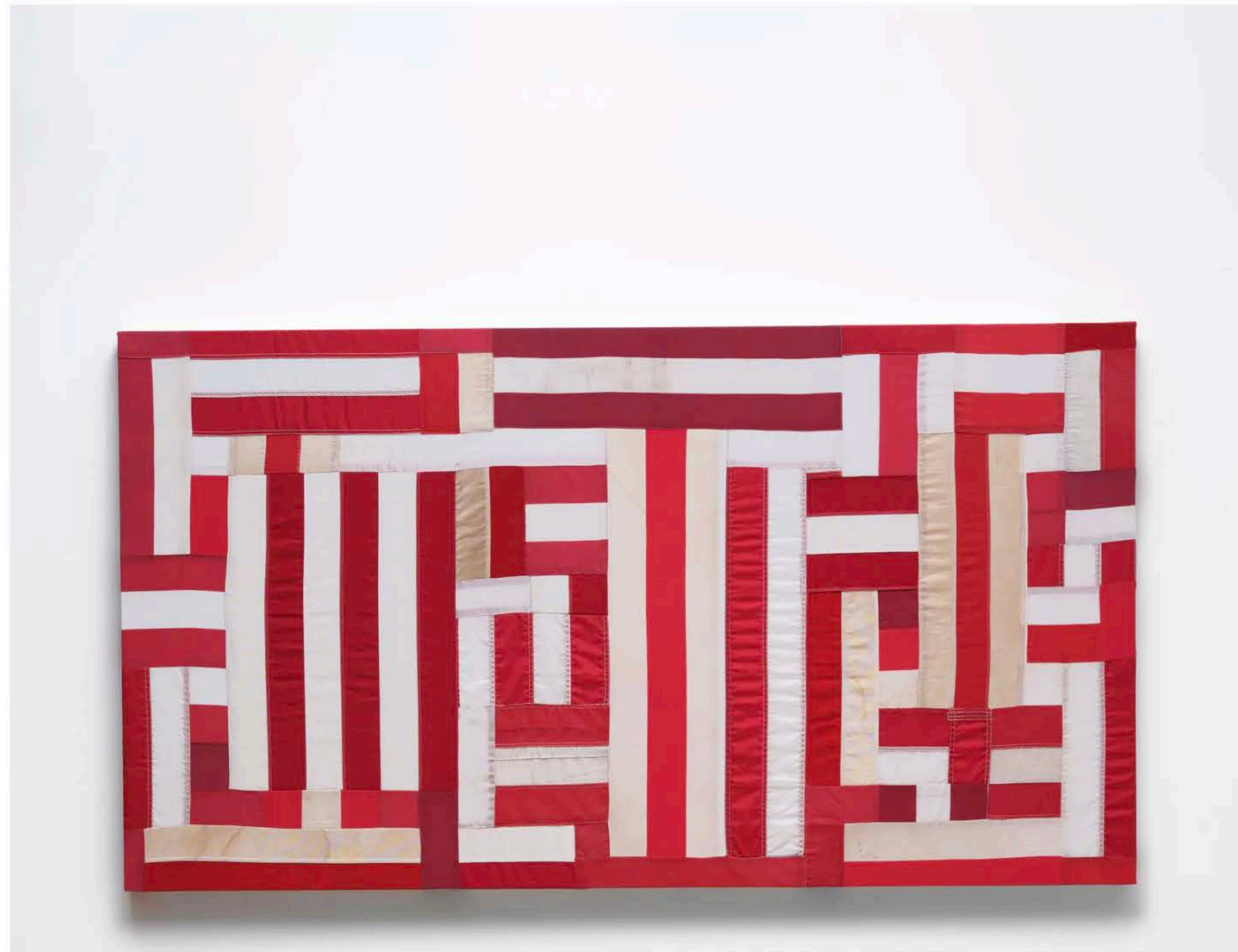
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Ms. Kraus made the point that when collectors are buying in quantity from one artist, they have already established a shared taste at the very least, which makes becoming friends easier.





“Justice (red),” 2021 by Hank Willis Thomas. Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer; photo Aaron Wessling

The New York artist Hank Willis Thomas had a philosophical take on the artist-patron relationship.

“Every collector is a steward of my work, and they live with it longer than I do,” Mr. Thomas said, adding, “I can learn about my own work through a collector’s enthusiasm.”

One of the most significant stewards of his work, with 160 pieces, is Jordan Schnitzer, a collector based in Portland, Ore., whom Mr. Thomas called a close friend. In February, “[Hank Willis Thomas: LOVERULES - From the Collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family Foundation](#)” goes on view at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle.

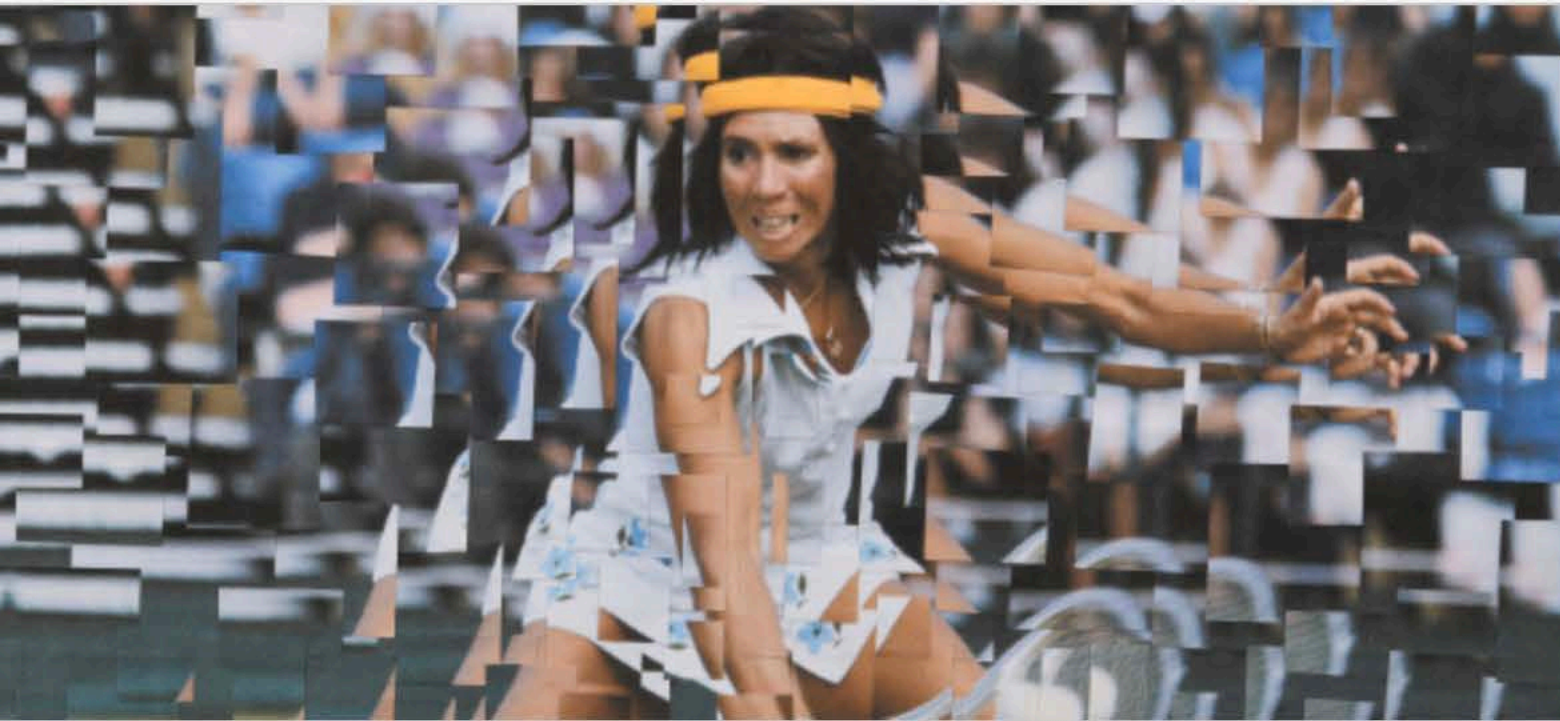
“He feels a responsibility to share it with the world,” Mr. Thomas said of Mr. Schnitzer’s feelings about his work. “It’s not just a quick exchange.”



Mr. Thomas, left, with Jordan Schnitzer. In February, “Hank Willis Thomas: LOVERULES - From the Collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family Foundation” goes on view at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle. Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation

The collector — who also shows art from his trove at the Schnitzer Collection space in Portland — said that he texts Mr. Thomas frequently, and sees the artist when he can.

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“It’s Jordan who makes the effort,” Mr. Thomas said of the friendly collector.

Mr. Schnitzer met the artist four years ago at a museum show of Mr. Thomas’s work in Portland.

“I loved the work, and we just clicked,” the collector said, and it fueled his curiosity. “I look at Hank’s work and say, ‘What kind of mind would create that?’”

Artists, of course, can also be collectors of other people’s work, and that includes Mr. Pendleton, the multidisciplinary maker in New York, who said that his perspective as an artist shapes how he approaches that relationship.

“I never expect the artists I buy to talk to me or have lunch,” he said. “Their time is not part of the equation.”

Mr. Pendleton said he owned several works on paper by the veteran sculptor Melvin Edwards that are meaningful to him, but that he had never reached out to the older artist for a studio hangout. He added, “I’ve been very sheepish about it, actually.”

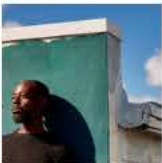
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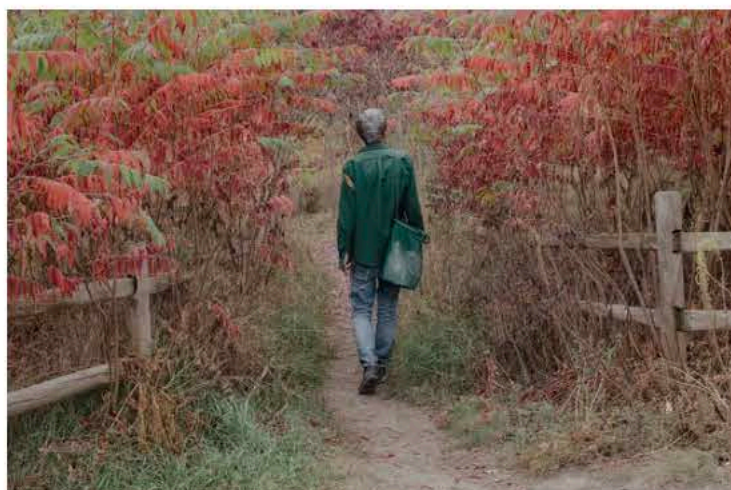
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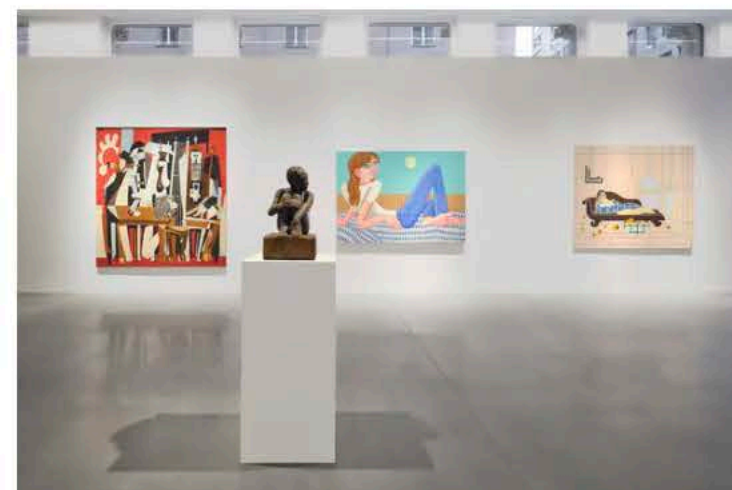
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