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Want a Warehouse of Art? Try the Installment Plan



Ron and Ann Pizzuti with Marina Abramovic's "Artist Portrait With a Candle (C)," left, and "Artist Portrait with a Candle (B)." At bottom left is Sofie Lachaert's "Shunga Candleholder" atop Ron Arad's "Paved With Good Intentions Table 44." Credit Marina Abramovic and Sean Kelly Gallery/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Sofie Lachaert, via Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Daniel Dorsa for The New York Times

By Hilarie M. Sheets

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"Without Frank Stella, we wouldn't be collecting art," said Ron Pizzuti, who fell in love with a small Stella painting in Paris in the early 1970s but couldn't imagine spending \$10,000 on an artwork. The Ohio native, then working in retail, got his initiation buying a Karel Appel print for \$900 on installment in 1974 from a gallery closer to home, in Columbus.

After he founded the Pizzuti Companies, a real estate and development concern, in 1976, he soon found he could buy Stella as well as Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Agnes Martin and Cy Twombly.

“Ron was born with the gift of a very aesthetic eye,” Ann Pizzuti said, sitting with her husband in their Manhattan apartment overlooking Madison Square Park, where Mr. Pizzuti was recently honored for helping to [steer its public art program](#). Ms. Pizzuti good-naturedly indulges her husband’s obsession with collecting, now focused on contemporary, often politically charged works by artists including Titus Kaphar, Zhang Huan, Adi Nes and Simone Leigh.

Numbering some 2,400 pieces, the collection is installed in their homes here; in Sarasota, Fla.; and in Columbus, also home of the Pizzuti Collection — an 18,000-square-foot, nonprofit public space with rotating exhibitions. [“Go Figure,”](#) up now, features work by Deana Lawson, Omar Victor Diop and Derrick Adams, among others.



“In this lifetime” by Jim Hodges, a favorite of Ms. Pizzuti. Credit Daniel Dorsa for The New York Times

While their Columbus home retains some earlier acquisitions of classic Minimalist pieces, the New York apartment has works exclusively from the 21st century, including two monumental photographs of and by Marina Abramovic. “I treat them as a diptych,” said Mr. Pizzuti, adding that the artist, who holds a candle in the photos, actually burned her finger while making one of the images.

Also displayed here is a photograph of a tree [by Jim Hodges](#), who laser-cut the leaves so they appear to flutter; [sculptures by Ken Price](#), Arlene Shechet and Josiah McElheny; and a [Tony Oursler piece that consists of a blue splotchlike shape framing a close-up video of an eye and mouth that occasionally mutters things like, “Why is the sky blue?”](#)

“It’s a long loop, and I didn’t know it spoke,” Mr. Pizzuti said. “I was in the bedroom and heard this voice and thought, ‘Somebody’s in here.’ I had the alarm on. I walk in, and lo and behold it was this.”

Following are edited excerpts from our conversation.

How would you characterize your collecting approach at this point?

RON PIZZUTI Today, unless it’s a Frank Stella print from Tyler Graphics in excellent condition, or another artist we already collect in depth, we’re not buying anything produced before 2001. We had to redefine what we were doing, otherwise we’d be broke. We’re particularly focusing on African and African-American artists. It started a few

years ago with Lyle Ashton Harris and Hank Willis Thomas. Also Cuban artists like [Roberto Diago](#), who I think is the best living artist in Cuba today.

Ann, what has your role been in this enterprise?

ANN PIZZUTI Support. Sometimes I go to the galleries and the shows. I've learned a lot.



Tony Oursler's "Bluerialisation With Head," a piece that is more than meets the eye. Credit Daniel Dorsa for The New York Times

RON PIZZUTI She selected one of my favorites. It's a glass wall piece by Rob Wynne called "Exhale," his interpretation of champagne bubbles. We took a Stella painting down in our home in Columbus and hung it in its place.

ANN PIZZUTI There are certain pieces that I claim are my pieces. The Jim Hodges tree. The [Gerhard] Richter.

RON PIZZUTI We paid \$135,000 for that. Today it's well into seven figures, maybe eight figures. It's one of the problems in the art market today. The prices are accelerating too fast. It's attracting a whole new group of collectors who, in my opinion, are collecting for the wrong reason. We've never bought anything thinking that down the road we'll sell it. Buy with your heart, not with your pocketbook.

Do you have to agree on things?

ANN PIZZUTI In all the pieces he has, maybe there have been five where I said, “You’re not hanging that in my house.”

RON PIZZUTI The first was a [Lucas Samaras](#) painting, with skeletal-like faces and exaggerated teeth and nostrils, face upon face. It’s not a very pleasant looking piece. I love it. Now it’s in [our son] Joel’s house.

So you have veto power over what gets hung?

ANN PIZZUTI Yes. Not what gets bought. Probably there would be a few surprises for me at the warehouse.