



Inside My Collection: Vaughn Spann

Allyssia Alleyne

Feb 15, 2022 12:59pm

When it comes to a major sale, you never forget your first—the major details of it, anyway. At least this is the case for Vaughn Spann, the Florida-born painter who was already being tipped as “one to watch” before he’d graduated from the Yale School of Art in 2018. During his second year, he may or may not have been introduced to Bernard Lumpkin—the prolific collector of work by Black artists—by the would-be playwright, producer, and actor Jeremy O. Harris, then a fellow student at Yale.

“I think it was Jeremy....In the art school, we’re just all one big unit; you kind of find your people,” Spann recalled over a video call from his airy mid-century home outside Newark, New Jersey.

Regardless of who made the introduction, Lumpkin eventually made it down to Spann’s studio. “He was super chill. He wasn’t pushy or impulsive, nothing like that,” the artist recalled. “He listened to my story, saw the works. He gravitated towards something, and then a few weeks later, he was like, ‘Hey, Vaughn, just following up. I really liked the conversation. I’d like to acquire a piece.’

“That’s always weird because [at first] you’re just like, I don’t even know what this is about,” Spann continued. “It was just so new to me. But you definitely learn the ropes in terms of acquisition or selling.”

Today, Spann is all too familiar with the process, having found favor with private collectors and public institutions alike. (The Brooklyn Museum, the Hirshhorn, Pérez Art Museum Miami, and the Rubell Museum all own his pieces.) But at the same time, he’s been slowly building a formidable collection of his own.



Installation view, Vaughn Spann, *Untitled*, 2022. Photo by Nate Palmer for Artsy.

Like his own mixed-media practice—a deliberate split between vivid, texture-rich abstraction and strange figuration—Spann’s collection is an exercise in diversity. There are sculptures and paintings, works on paper and wood, prints and photographs. Work by younger artists like Shikeith (another Yale friend), Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe, Alteronce Gumby, and Natalie Ball are spoken of with as much excitement as those by the likes of John Armleder, Stanley Whitney, Sam Gilliam, and Melvin Edwards. Surrounding himself with stimulating works is a driving purpose behind Spann’s collecting, but it’s not the only one. As an artist-slash-collector and a Black collector, he sees his patronage as a way to challenge engrained power structures within the art world, while enabling artists he believes in to continue creating.

Spann invited Artsy to his New Jersey home to explore his collection, and opened up to us about art school trades, the collectors who inspire him, and how his reputation as an artist affects his dealings as a collector.

Allyssia Alleyne: Did you grow up with art in your home?

Vaughn Spann: I didn't really come from a community that necessarily embraced art in the privatized space. I would draw things and I would give them to my grandparents or my parents, and they'd be happy. But that was the extent of that. I don't really think I hung a lot of that stuff up, to be honest, so there was no real art in the house.

A.A.: Do you remember the first private collection you encountered?

V.S.: That's a good question. It wasn't until I was an adult. [Prior to that] I was out of the loop in terms of private ownership, or that the work in people's homes was something profound and significant. It took a long time to actually start to see what people were actually collecting in their homes, and what they were supporting.

But on the public side, I started to go to museums as soon as I was old enough to go by myself. I would visit any local or New York museum and see public collections—places like MoMA, the Whitney, and the Guggenheim. Just those easily accessible places that I could visit.



Installation view, top left to bottom right, John M. Armleder, *Jellyfish 2*, 2019; Yayoi Kusama, *Yellow Pumpkin* edition; Isamu Noguchi, Akari floor lamp. Photo by Nate Palmer for Artsy.

A.A.: So when did you start collecting?

V.S.: I've been trading with artists for so long. I remember trading with my peers in undergrad, especially after our thesis show. But I wasn't necessarily thinking about collecting in terms of patronage. It was a form of communal exchange and support. In grad school, that just became a way of life. At Yale, you'd be preparing for a critique two weeks out and scavenging for material, and find someone's entire painting in the dumpster. That just became normal. You were either just mentally supporting a friend or someone that you really thought was great or amazing or whatever, or you were helping out a friend by lending your space to hang their work because they couldn't house it themselves.

Grad school is a one-time opportunity, so it felt like there was this heightened interest in what everyone was doing. I just remember being influenced and so inspired by what a lot of my peers were doing at the time. There was this synergy. So even if someone didn't give a shit about something they were tossing out, we'd be like, "Oh, you're throwing this out? Let me keep this." Or, "I've got this work. I'm giving it away. Let's trade if you want to live with the work."

A.A.: Do you still have any of the works from your Yale days?

V.S.: I won't name any names, but yes. I still have quite a few works from school.

A.A.: Do you remember the first work that you bought yourself, rather than traded? We're going into the archives now.

V.S.: I know, now you're getting me deep. I can't recall the first work I paid for, per se. I remember buying a tiny little painting by Rebecca Ness. It's a little watercolor work on wood panel. At the time, I was leaving school and she was getting ready to leave school, and I just found myself supporting her and other artists as well.

By the time I was leaving grad school, I was at a transitional moment in my career and starting to see the light in terms of stability. I was starting to already sell some works here and there, which was good. Throughout grad school, there were all of these fantastic artists that I kept tabs on, and I had remembered Rebecca fondly because we shared a moment when she came in for her in-person interview at Yale. I had helped her set up her station, and tried to ease her nerves. She was so, so sweet.

Everyone that applies to Yale brings these massive paintings; so much dramatic work comes through. And Rebecca had literally come to the interview with, like, playing cards. I was like, "Woah. You came to the interview with paintings you can probably put in your pocket." And they were actually phenomenal. They just packed this big punch.



Installation view, including works by Danielle McKinney, Ana Benaroya, Rebecca Ness, Sam Gilliam, Robert Nava, Genesis Tramine, Haley Josephs, Lauren Halsey, and Tunji Adeniyi- Jones, among others. Photo by Nate Palmer for Artsy.

A.A.: Why did you decide to stop trading works, and start buying them?

V.S.: There are artists who don't like to trade because they'd rather acquire a work without having to exchange something of their own, and then you have artists who like to acquire things as patronage or support.

Right when I was leaving school, the trade thing was still happening because it was just easy. But it just got to a point where I was like, let me stop trading and let me just actually support other artists. Now that things are becoming more stable, let me just acquire things because there's a certain level of reciprocation and respect that comes with that.

The art world is really funny. We don't want to talk about money but, as artists, we need money to have studios, and we need money to survive and thrive.

A.A.: Do you think the fact that you're an artist yourself affects your dealings with artists you're looking to buy from?

V.S.: In some ways, I think it has really been beneficial. When I see an artist that I really like, or really love, I reach out to them, I have deeper conversations, then we do a studio visit, or Zoom calls, something like that. I give any advice I can. That's just genuine because I know the game. I'm generally very private, which is why I don't do much in the art world per se, but I'm also just very open, and people really appreciate that—galleries appreciate it, artists appreciate it. I think that's really significant because sometimes the idea of a collector can kind of get a strange rap, or there's a weird power dynamic going on.

I think a lot of artists make this distinction that the collectors go in this separate category, for better or worse. So it's been nice, as an artist, to sort of break down some of the strange barriers that exist.

But I do get the flip side of the coin too. I remember having this weird interaction with an artist whose work I really liked. I reached out to him to acquire a work, or at least get to know the works better. I had started out just speaking about how much of a fan I was of the works, and talked about things that I had acquired and things I'd traded. And at the end, I was like, "If there's anything available, or you work with a gallery, let me know, I'll reach out." And his comment was, "I don't sell to artists." And I was like, "Oh... interesting." So, you know, you get all these different turns. Maybe it was a competition thing. But I'm fortunate to have supported and built deeper relationships with artists, and a good amount of galleries as well.



Installation view, Stanley Whitney, *Untitled*, 2019. Photo by Nate Palmer for Artsy.

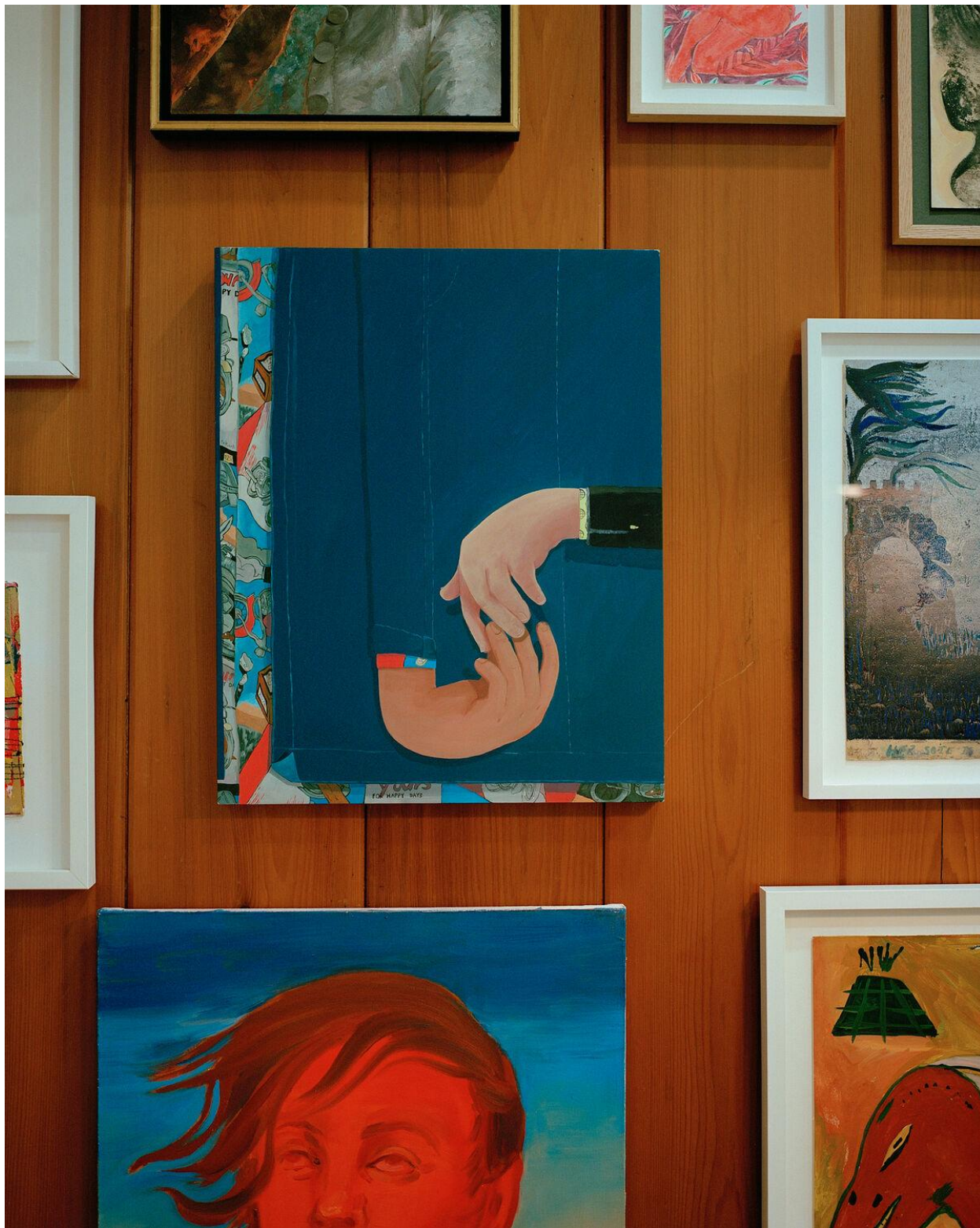
A.A.: Wow, was that in person or online?

V.S.: This was an email exchange or something like that. But that was just a mic drop. I think that moment just harkens back to the fact that there's some hierarchy that the art world perpetuates, where collectors take on this power once they're titled a collector. It's changing in this day and age, but a lot of the time, collecting doesn't look like a Black thing. I think people tend to associate collectors with white folks with money, and that can kind of get a little bit annoying. But in a strange way, once people recognize that you are collecting in a serious or in-depth way, they start throwing PDFs at you or, kind of let you in that circle. It's just a weird dynamic that I find myself working through every now and then.

A.A.: Has there been a particular moment when, even just to yourself, you were like, "Wow, I'm a serious collector"? Not that I think you have an ego like that, but...

V.S.: Nah, nah, nah. (*Laughs.*) There was no point when I became a serious collector. There was never a moment when I felt as though I'd arrived. There are still many times when I look at my collection and think, dang, I wish it was like this, or I wish I had that. But a collection is a growing thing. You just have to live with the works and appreciate them over time. That's really it.

One of my favorite expressions goes, "There's really levels to this." I think that goes for everything in life. I acknowledge that there are people with "serious" collections, and that there are people who are starting up; that every collection has its own agenda or type. You can have a prolific collection of only emerging artists, or you can have a prolific collection full of blue-chip legends. But I don't necessarily see a hierarchy there. I'm a Libra, so I'm truly always trying to find balance.



Installation view, Rebecca Ness, *Contact*, 2018. Photo by Nate Palmer for Artsy.

A.A.: After you bought that painting from Rebecca Ness, how did your collection grow from there?

V.S.: My ease into collecting really came through friends and art-world peers. It became a matter of acquiring works from people within my inner circle. I wasn't really extending myself beyond my social circle at all; I was never really reaching out to people I hadn't interacted with in some way, or making cold calls to galleries.

Once I started there, I was able to find works through friends. My close friend Shikeith is a good example. We did a trade before grad school—we were incoming classmates and we bonded, and I wound up sending him a work on paper in the mail or something like that. And before we graduated, we traded artworks. I got a little black-and-white photograph of his that I love.

More recently, we were just chopping it up, walking through Chelsea together, and he asked me to come to Yossi Milo Gallery so he could show me some of the works he had on consignment. He showed me this crazy balloon sculpture and I was like, "Oh my god, this is crazy. Is it available? I want to buy it." We've traded works and we've been in dialogue for a long time, but it got to a point where I was just like, I want to support you beyond this. I don't want to trade you anything, I want to actually make sure that I'm contributing something that you can utilize to make more work because I think that's really important for an artist.

But even if I wasn't your best friend or if we'd never really had much to say to one another, I would come to you and let you know that I appreciate your work, and that I would love to live with a painting or acquire something. A lot of artists that I've met have been genuinely cool about it and really nice.

A.A.: Is there a unifying theme to your collection?

V.S.: No, there's no particular subject or theme or anything like that. I like to say that they are works that I find inspirational; that keep me motivated to go on to the studio. They're works that give me joy, works that give me mental relief. I have a Stanley Whitney painting over my bed, for example—everyone knows I love Stanley Whitney—and I look at that work right before I go to bed, when I want to enter a sort of Zen space.

But I also want to look at works that help me retain a level of criticality about the world. I want to look at a work and feel frustration, or find an echo of certain sentiments about my life, or to have those feelings complicated.



Installation view, from left to right, Shikeith, *the black boy and the tree*, 2016; Titus Kaphar, *Untitled (from the "Redaction" project)*, 2019. Photo by Nate Palmer for Artsy.

A.A.: What do you mean?

V.S.: For example, there's a work from Titus Kaphar's "Redaction" series in the hallway, of a young, Black male, and it's about being on trial and things like that. It's a really deep work, but it also shows a cornerstone of the everyday, and those are the types of things that I like to be able to see in the house. I have two young boys and also a daughter, and I want to have those critical dialogues with the kids; I want them to find moments where there's some levity, but also not forget the other end of the spectrum of everyday life.

A.A.: I was watching one of your interviews with David Castillo on YouTube, and you mentioned that you're a bit of a homebody. You have your wife and kids, and you're all living with these works together. It's great to hear that there are these educational moments, too, and from such a young age as well.

V.S.: It's just nice to have young Black kids growing up in that sort of environment, you know, because I didn't have that. It'll be great to see what that means for them, and how they develop. My oldest, Hunter, his first word was "yellow," and that was because everyday, I would walk up to our Stanley Whitney painting and name all the colors. And then one day, when I got to yellow, he just said it. It was really funny. So that's just the ways that art can inspire or influence kids.

I mean, it can get a little bit stressful, depending on where a work is. I have an Otis Quaicoe painting in my oldest son's room, by his toy chests, so I always get anxiety about its location, but he's a good steward of the work. It's still in perfect condition; no one's drawn on it yet or anything like that. I think that they're just naturally developing an appreciation for the works. Now, there are times when our youngest son will get a little bit too close to a painting, and the other kids are like, "Remember: You can't touch the art, you can only look."



Installation view, from left to right, work by Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe, 2020; and a work by Vaughn Spann. Photo by Nate Palmer for Artsy.

A.A.: Are there ways in which your own practice guides what you decide to collect?

V.S.: My practice is between abstraction and figuration, and I like to echo that in what I collect. My collection is literally broken in half; it is even. I always tell people that as a Black painter, the association of the norm will always be figurative work as genuine, or whatever that argument historically has been, but for me, to break out of that has always been important. So right when you walk into the house, you see an Alteronice Gumby work in the foyer; it's the first thing you're greeted with when you come into this space.

I also like finding little threads to my own artistic making. I recently acquired a piece by John Armleder, for example, while I was looking for more abstract paintings for the house to find that balance. So I was looking through PDFs, and noticed John had this tiny little X glued into the work. And I was like, "Oh, shit. I need that painting." If you know my work [*Ed.: the X form is a recurring motif in Spann's practice*], it was like, that's definitely a nice connection to what I'm already interested in. And it was super random. There's also this little work in my bathroom by Umar Rashid that also echoes the X thing I was talking about. I bought that one because it had all these little Xes on the soldiers' backs. So just in terms of an aesthetic thing, I think little stuff like that is really cool. Whether or not it's the material or something conceptual or whatnot. But just small stuff like that I find interesting.

A.A.: So you've decided you're very interested in an artist, but when you're on the fence about whether to buy the work. What usually ends up being the deciding factor?

V.S.: I always appreciate the artists that I'm considering, but sometimes I have to consider if it's the right work—not for my collection, because I can live with a lot, but just in terms of maintenance. I remember I bought a work from Natalie Ball, an artist from Oregon who I think is purely genius. It's a ready-made sculpture of a baseball glove that's supposed to be like a head, and there's a pack of like, yaki weave on the back. It's just one of those things that looks like it belongs in the Met. And I just wound up enclosing it in plexiglass or something just so that the kids wouldn't destroy it. But it's just one of those things where when I was going to acquire it, I was like, "Dammit, can I even display it? Where can I put it? Is it gonna be too complicated?" I want to be able to live with all the works I buy, so where is it going to exist in the house and what's the upkeep going to be? A part of owning works is also making sure that they're maintained and don't fall apart.



Installation view, left to right, Vaughn Spann, *Untitled (Marked Man)*, 2020; Brett Douglas Hunter, *Pink Creature Child Chair*, 2018; Brett Douglas Hunter, *Yellow Creature Child Chair*, 2018. Photo by Nate Palmer for Artsy.

A.A.: Do you feel as though being an artist yourself gives you clout as a collector with galleries?

V.S.: It's weird once you start to get a little bit of traction or a name for yourself. I'll inquire about a work now, whether through Artsy or directly to the gallery, and they'll be like, "Oh, hey, Vaughn. I saw your show in Shanghai. Love what you're doing." It's interesting to see people's responses or what they think about you, or if they'll even allow you to buy work in general, because the fact that you have a name, or that your work is selling, doesn't mean that access will be provided. I've inquired about work to galleries that I still to this day get zero response from. There are people who fully ghost or go MIA, or there's a sizing up thing—"Who do you own?" The art world is just a big, crazy atmosphere, of course, which is why I stay away from it.

A.A.: What has been your experience buying on Artsy?

V.S.: I find Artsy just fantastic because it sort of breaks the ice. It is an easy way to get your feet wet because it can take away some of the craziness of in-person experiences. I've bought multiple works by Stanley Whitney off of Artsy—some works on paper and a work on canvas. When I acquired the Stanley Whitney works, most of the galleries were super chill. But I remember one or two galleries didn't respond to me about an inquiry. I was like, are they wont to do this? I was so pissed off. I never followed up, and I don't really care at this point, but it was just interesting because the buying experience is always twofold.



Installation view, Charlie Alston, *Jet*, 2021. Photo by Nate Palmer for Artsy.

A.A.: Are you comfortable buying works of art sight unseen, or that you haven't seen in person?

V.S.: I guess that's a new phenomenon now. When COVID shut down the art world, my gallery was placing works in these weird online viewing rooms, and I had to get used to that. I don't know if you've ever seen my work in person, but anybody I've ever met, when they see the work in person, they're like, "Holy shit. There's this much texture?"

There's this much stuff happening on the surface?" My paintings always flatten out digitally, but then when you see them in person, you kind of get it. But I've been buying things sight unseen as well. I don't think anything has come to the house yet that has just looked totally different, hasn't met my expectations, which is good. (*Laughs.*)

There's one work I bought that looked a certain way online, and when I saw it in person, I was like, "What are these little small paint marks?" It was one of the things that doesn't read online, almost like my painting. I still love it, but it kind of threw me off a little bit.

That's just the sort of atmosphere we're in. You can still see art in person, but you may have to take a chance on something digitally. I'm okay with that—I mean, as long as I get a high-res, I'm okay.

A.A.: You went from trading works to buying works from people in your circle, and people friends recommended by word of mouth. How are you discovering artists these days?

V.S.: It's a mixed bag. I'm off social media now (it was too much of a distraction), but Instagram was a nice way of seeing what the hot thing was. What I've been doing lately is acquiring works through my galleries, David Castillo and Almine Rech, or at least with references from my galleries. David has a very intimate roster of artists that I respect, such as Sanford Biggers and Shinique Smith; and Almine has the legends among emerging artists. I seem to gravitate towards what they're interested in, which is, I guess, why I work with them.

Then the other way is through conversations with other collectors, which is really important. Often, I'll speak to patrons of my own work. During a studio visit, because they know I collect as well, we'll have an exchange, a sidebar. "What did you buy? What are you looking at right now? Who's interesting?" I respect the patrons that support my work, and I've developed great relationships with them, and that's been super helpful for me.

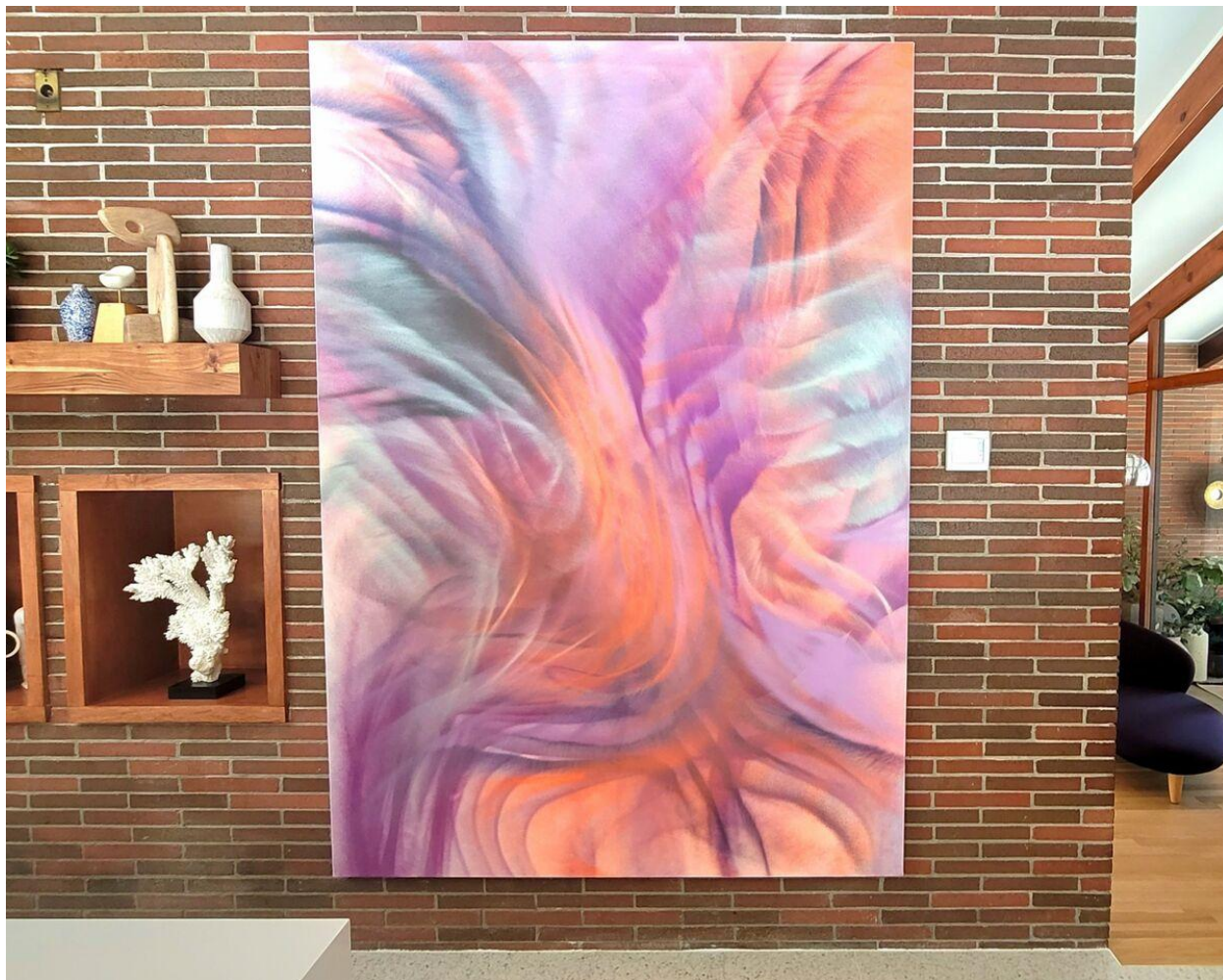


Installation view, Alteronce Gumby, *Soul Searching*, 2019. Photo by Nate Palmer for Artsy.

A.A.: Are there any particular patrons or other collectors who've inspired your own collecting practice?

V.S.: I have two L.A.-based collectors, gentlemen named Arthur Lewis and Hau Nguyen, who were early supporters of my work. They've always been genuine and honest, and tried to put my interests forward; I just really respect them. Whenever you go to their house, it's obvious they have a good eye, and probably one of the most prominent collections ever. It's mostly contemporary artists; a lot of legends, as well as younger artists. I remember going to their house the first time. There's a Titus Kaphar and a Mickalene Thomas when you walk in; I go upstairs and there's an Amy Sherald painting over the couch. They have works hanging on the ceiling. You're just blown away; it's crazy. They're genuine art lovers, and I definitely have a deep respect for them. But even early on in my career, having moments with Rashid Johnson was influential. Here was an artist at the top of his game acquiring works, trading works, just being able to do it all. I could see how important that is to him. Also, when you objectively look at the works that someone like him acquires, you can see how they influence what it is he makes and thinks about day to day.

This is why more artists should be profiled for stuff like this: we're trading extensively, we acquire extensively, and typically we're left with all these works from people who mean things to us and our social circles, or our peers, or of a certain time period. So I think artists just have some of the most genuinely interesting collections because they speak towards the era in which they were making work.



Installation view, Andrea Marie Breiling, *Buscando Amor*, 2021. Photo courtesy of Vaughn Spann.

A.A.: Who are the artists on your radar at the moment? Whose work is on your wishlist?

V.S.: I was looking at a sculpture by Huma Bhabha—the thing is phenomenal. So I'm speculating on whether to acquire it or not. I've been trying to find this balance between investing in older, blue-chip artists that really inspire me, and emerging artists who are either just coming up or who are finally getting their due. I was looking at another work by Stanley Whitney; acquiring a work by Rashid Johnson would be cool. On the younger side, I think Lauren Quin is a phenomenal painter. There's an artist that Deli Gallery works with, Charlie Alston. I think Charlie's gonna be great. I just spoke to Max [Marshall, founder and director of Deli Gallery] about another artist, Sahara Longe, the other day. She's from London; the work is fantastic. So shout out to Deli Gallery—hopefully I can get a work eventually.

A.A.: What does being a collector mean to you beyond the act of buying art? Do you feel a sense of responsibility or mission?

V.S.: It's twofold. For me, being a collector means being a good steward of the culture. It means allowing myself to collect works of the moment—works that reflect where we've been in history, the present time that we live in, and where we're going. I think that's what many collectors try to do: They try to buy the moment, or buy historical works that speak to different things. It's wanting to know that my kids can look at these works and be challenged, and appreciate the spectrums of life that are indicated through the works.



Portrait of Vaughn Spann with Kenny Scharf, *HOT 'N SKRATCHY*, 2020. Photo by Nate Palmer for Artsy.

On the other side, it's really important for me that there's representation of Black folks that collect, as a challenge to the annoying dichotomies that exist between the white people and people of color in the art world. There's always this weird power dynamic when you consider who's creating the work, and who owns the gallery, who the work is being sold to, who's coming to my studio and trying to get a painting.

From the time I got out of school, I've told my galleries that they had better be selling to Black people. Like, if there are eight works, four of them better go to Black collections. And if they don't, you had better have tried to put them in Black collections. So all my

galleries now go out of their way to make sure that's something that they're considering because they know it's important to me. I don't play around like that.

People in the art world just have this association with whiteness and collecting that really annoys me. So I'm just sort of challenging that, and making sure that other people—even just other young people—can feel inclined to trade or acquire works. It's not an age thing or a financial thing or whatever. You can get works, prints, at any price point. Once you see that reflection [of yourself among collectors], you feel that it's in reach, but if you're not seeing that, you don't understand it, or you don't feel an association to it. So for me, that's a really an important part of why I collect in general: for that representational aspect, you know?