

Thursday 18 October

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The Art Collector: Kenneth Montague

Published: 9 days ago

Views: 486

Font Size: [a](#) / [A](#)



Words Bomi Odufunade **Pictured** Dr Kenneth Montague at home in Toronto next to the painting Any Number Of Preoccupations, 2010 by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, part of his Wedge Collection. Photo credit: © Markian Lozowchuk 2012.

Over 15 years ago Toronto-based dentist Kenneth Montague began collecting photographic works that explored black identity and the African diaspora. Today he is one of Canada's prominent art collectors. The Wedge Collection comprises more than 200 photographs, as well as paintings, video, sculpture and design objects. It reflects Montague's love for and interest in contemporary art that explores race, gender, identity, community and personal style.

At the beginning of 1997 Montague built on the collection by founding Wedge Curatorial Projects, a non-profit organisation promoting alternative perspectives on community and culture. And in recent years he has curated many shows featuring works from the Wedge Collection, including Position As Desired/Exploring African-Canadian Identity: Photographs From The Wedge Collection at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto (2010-2011) and Becoming: Photographs From The Wedge Collection at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Detroit (2008). Montague currently sits on the Photography Curatorial Committee of the Art Gallery of Ontario and Tate Modern's Africa Acquisitions Committee. ARISE caught up with him ahead of his visit to Frieze Art Fair in London.

You are a full-time dentist as well as an art collector and curator. At what point in your career did your passion for art begin?

I grew up on the border of Canada and America, just as the civil rights movement was transforming into Black Power, and my parents were some of the first Jamaican immigrants in our community. So I was fairly immersed in issues of race and representation, which ultimately became the major themes of my collection.

I was definitely an arts-oriented kid, but science also fascinated me. In the end I decided to pursue both. Dentistry provided the financial basis for collecting art, which led to my interest in curatorial work. It's a busy life, but a very fulfilling one.

I hear that you are a budding photographer. Did this fuel your interest in photography?

Not true! The Wedge Collection has a definite focus on portraiture, but I am thinking about the environment in my personal work – especially industrial architecture and design.

What was your first purchase?

My first serious purchase was Couple In Raccoon Coats by James VanDerZee. I first saw it as a ten year old, at the Detroit Institute of Arts, and the image of the immaculately turned out couple leaning against a luxury car in front of handsome Harlem brownstones stayed with me. Many years later, in 1999, I contacted the late artist's wife and produced the first solo show of his work in Canada. I kept that photograph for myself.



James VanDerZee, Couple In Raccoon Coats, 1932.

© Donna Mussenden VanDerZee and Dr Kenneth Montague / The Wedge Collection.

What was the last artwork you bought?

A large photograph by Manuela Marques, a Portuguese artist based in Paris. I saw her work in Lisbon last year as part of the nominees' exhibition for the BES [Photo 2011] prize, which she eventually won.

Why did you decide to collect only work that explores black identity and the African diaspora?

It was a way of exploring my own history, which was not part of my education growing up in Canada. The essential question 'Who am I?' was the driving force. I also recognised the need to 'wedge' discourse around black identity into the mainstream of contemporary art. But in recent years my collecting interests have broadened to include works by Canadian artists such as Edward Burtynsky, Scott Conarroe, and Jesse Boles.

Are there any African-Canadian artists that currently excite you?

Yes, we have a small but very active scene here. Megan Morgan, Christina Leslie, Stacey Tyrell and of course Dawit Petros are all producing deeply engaging work in their photographic practices. We have some wonderful painters such as Sandra Brewster, Stephen Fakiyesi and Dionne Simpson. I recently purchased a brilliant video by Deanna Bowen— a performed oral history recounting the dramatic journey of the artist's family from southern USA to western Canada, as told by Bowen herself. And we are all still reeling from the sudden passing of Denyse Thomasos, who was among Canada's most successful painters.

What do you consider the key element in building an art collection?

Discipline. Once you determine your vision you must move unwaveringly forwards. Trends are irrelevant. Quality of course is essential, but more importantly there should be a dynamic relationship between the works.

How do you find works?

I often learn about new artists when doing research for a curatorial project. Also essential are studio visits, where I often become excited by a new work – something completely different than I had expected. I try to develop a relationship with the artist and their gallery, where I will ultimately acquire their work.

You're coming to Frieze this October. Is this your first time at the London fair? What other fairs do you normally attend?

I love London but this is my first time at Frieze. I typically hit Art Basel and Art Basel Miami Beach but I've also have enjoyed ARCO in Madrid, which features an excellent educational program. And I always attend Art Toronto, our hometown fair is getting better and better.

What artists are you looking forward to seeing at Frieze?

I am looking forward to seeing work by Nicholas Hlobo, Nandipha Mntambo and Zanele Muholi at Stevenson, who will be taking part in Frieze London for the first time this year. Around town, I'm going to check out Guyana-born Frank Bowling's poured paintings from the 1970s at Tate Britain, and Jamaican-British photographer Dennis Morris' collaboration with Tim Noble and Sue Webster with the Vinyl Factory at Blain/Southern.

In recent years, there seems to be a consensus that art fairs have become the premier destination for collectors acquiring works rather than buying directly from commercial galleries. What are your thoughts on this?

I think fairs are important, but more for research than acquisition. My final decision to purchase is based on conversations with artists, gallery owners, curators, and other collectors – which often continues long after the fair is done.

Tell us about Wedge Curatorial Projects.

Created in 1997, Wedge evolved from a commercial gallery into a curatorial project. Originally conceived to be both a private and public art experience, the gallery was literally 'wedged' inside the hallway of my former loft. In this way, I began showcasing and promoting works exploring notions of black subjectivity and cultural representation. These shows were new to Toronto's contemporary art scene. Over time I realised that I was more interested in telling stories than selling art. Today Wedge Curatorial Projects is a non-profit organisation that promotes alternative perspectives on black culture through exhibitions, lectures and discussions. You can learn more at wedgecuratorialprojects.org.

What was the last show that blew you away?

I loved the most recent edition of the Studio Museum in Harlem's artist-in-residence graduate show, Primary Sources, featuring new work from Njideka Akunyili [featured in the upcoming issue of ARISE magazine], Meleko Mokgosi [interviewed in issue 16] and Xaviera Simmons.

What is your favourite artwork?

Barkley [L] Hendricks' 1975 painting Blood. I first saw it in London at the Whitechapel Gallery in their seminal show Back To Black. I kept a postcard of the painting on my fridge for the next couple of years. Ultimately, through a series of happy circumstances, I was able to acquire this work for my collection, and through its inclusion in Barkley's wonderful touring exhibition Birth Of The Cool I got to meet the artist himself.

From your travels, use one word to describe the art scene in each of the following cities: Toronto, London and New York?

Toronto: aspirational; London: inspirational; New York: conspiratorial!