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« Meet handbag designer Lauren Merkin at Cusp.

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« "Sweeney Todd," with Johnny Depp, on DVD.

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Crabbing returns on the Chesapeake.

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[The Washington Post]

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SUNDAY, MARCH 30, 2008

DC FN MG PG

QUEST SKINNER

"Old Man Around Sunset," acrylic and glitter on wood (\$500, first-time buyers \$250)



ALESSANDRA TORRES

"Portable Winter Series: Snow Flurries," porcelain, rabbit fur, powder and glass jar (\$1,250)



THREE WISE GUYS

Joe Heim, Justin Rude and Dan Zak

Dear Wise Guys:

I was repairing my kid's wagon yesterday and got to thinking, "Why doesn't this glue seal the lid of the glue container shut?" Specialty glues like Krazy Glue and Gorilla Glue are supposed to adhere to anything. Are the lids made out of some crazy non-adhesive space plastic?

— Bill

Dan: Finally, the first sensible question we've received since we started this charade. I called Elmer's, the company responsible for Krazy Glue, and caught the attention of its marketing manager in Columbus, Ohio.

Krazy Glue reacts chemically with moisture to bond, explains Terri Brown, and the plastic caps do a good job of keeping out moisture, which prevents the curing of the glue. And although Krazy Glue sticks to most anything, the bottle caps are made out of a plastic that prevents the bond from hardening intractably. So they virtually never get calls from people asking if the caps will stick to anything.

Justin: Sorry to interrupt. Dan was using Krazy Glue to find out if his keyboard is made of that plastic. It's not.



BY DANNY HELLMAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Dear Wise Guys:

I don't think I am crazy, but I remember when The Washington Post would print pictures and announcements of weddings when the couples were same-sex. Now I look and everyone is heterosexual! What gives with that? Has The Post changed its mind, or is no one gay getting married in the D.C. area?

— Proud PFLAG Mom

Justin: You are correct: No one gay is getting married in the D.C. area. While the District allows gay couples to formalize their relationships through domestic partnerships, it doesn't allow them to marry. And Maryland and Virginia are at least as restrictive, if not more so.

Same-sex union announcements can be found on the Celebrations page in Sunday's Style & Arts section, but they are listed as "Commitment Ceremonies." Of course, some gay couples, as well as straight people such as myself, may feel that doesn't carry the same weight. The Post is always open to feedback from readers, so feel free to express any concerns about this policy to the ombudsman at ombudsman@washpost.com.

Dear Wise Guys:

On the list of holiday closings, why does The Post mention liquor stores? They're not vital public service institutions.

— Bernhard

1 Have a question only the Three Wise Guys can answer? Send it to wiseguys@washpost.com and await their words of wise-dom.

Joe: Oh, Bernhard, we beg to differ. Next to hospitals and Chipotles, it's hard to imagine more vital public service institutions. But to get an official answer, we talked to Metro editor R.B. Brenner, and he told us the section tries to anticipate which closings the public would be most interested in. That includes such places as banks, libraries and, you guessed it, liquor stores.

Dan: Joe spent Easter Sunday slouched against the locked doorway of his neighborhood liquor store, waiting for sweet deliverance from his patriarchal holiday duties. If he had read the paper, he would've known to stay home and surrender himself to the wife, child, cat and however many Bacardi Breezes he could scrounge up in the basement.

Joe: You couldn't be more wrong, Danno. My neighborhood liquor store was open.

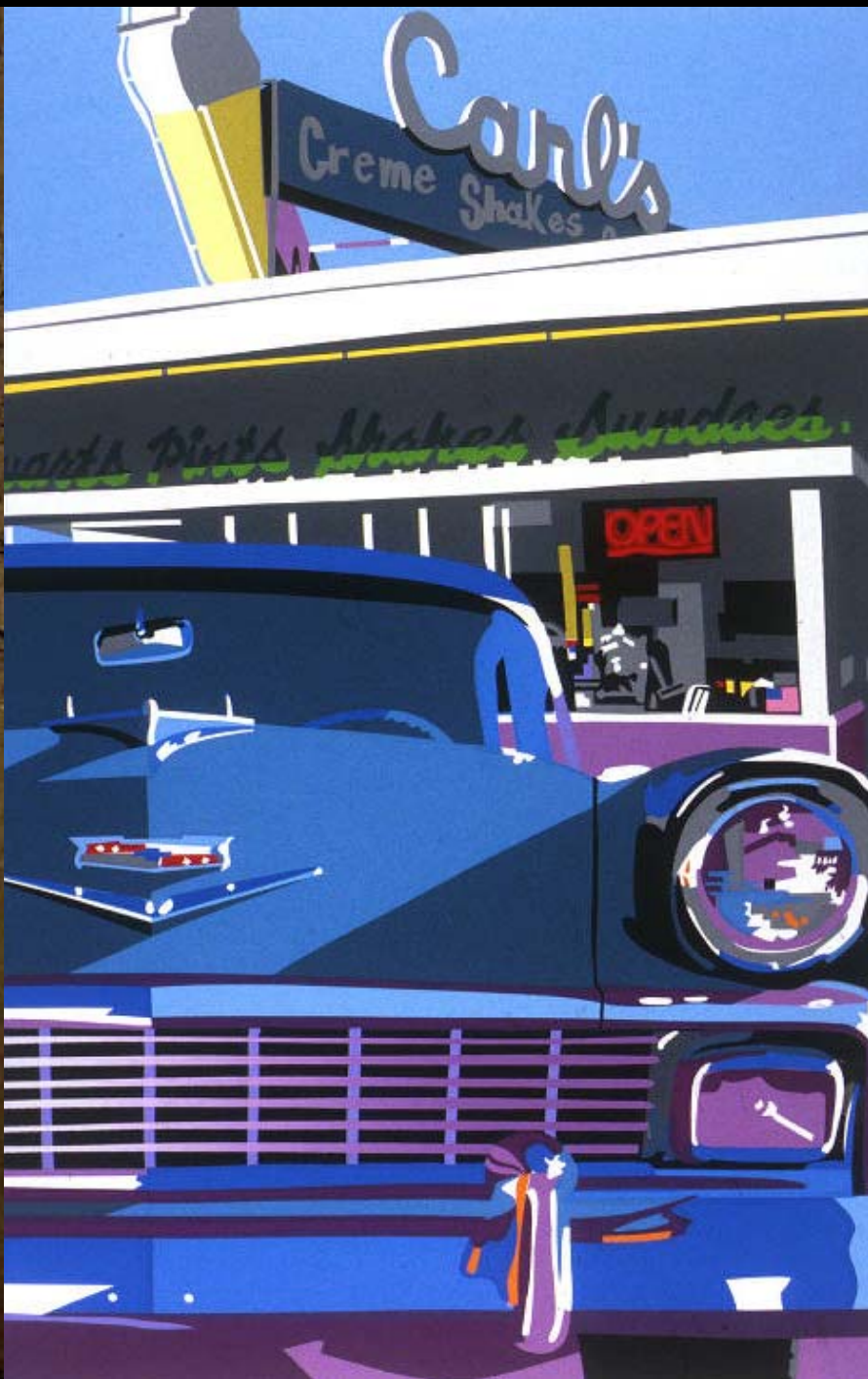
ART ON A BUDGET

The Secret to Starting a Great Art Collection? It's Not a Fat Bank Account.

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GRETCHEN SCHERMERHORN
"Harnessing Nature II," etching and monotype (\$300)



JOSEPH CRAIG ENGLISH
"Carl's," original serigraph (\$200)

How to Start An Art Collection

By DAN ZAK
Washington Post Staff Writer

The most vibrant room of the house I inhabit is the ground-floor bathroom, which isn't a bathroom so much as an eight-square-foot closet with a leaky toilet and a teeny sink.

That's the one room with original art. Hung on the wall is an 18-by-40-inch oil on canvas of a woman rendered in crimson swaths of goop and clothed in shimmering gold paint. The canvas is stretched across a wood frame and signed by the artist, Quest Skinner, who lives in LeDroit Park. I bought it from Skinner in 2006 at Eastern Market for \$160, discounted from \$400 after she saw I loved the piece but couldn't afford its starting price.

The fact that I, a writer of modest means, bought this beauty for a reasonable price does not alone demolish the notion that collecting art is the province of the wealthy. But the opinions of local artists, collectors, gallery owners and curators seem to do just that.

■ ■ ■

First, let's remember why we're buying art. The queen bee of the D.C. art world, Margery Goldberg, is here to remind us: Buy art because you love it and want to live with it forever. If you do, it's hard to have regrets about parting with the money.

"Buying a piece of art is like a good relationship," says Goldberg, owner and director of Zenith Gallery in Penn Quarter. "You shouldn't buy it if the most you like it is the first time you see it. It should grow over time. Every day you should like it a bit more."

■ ■ ■

Unlike with most relationships, though, you need dollars when you say "I do."

It's easy to recoil at a painting with a \$25,000 price tag at a commercial gallery and retreat to buying cheap, mass-produced art from Target. But you might find meaningful pieces at reasonable prices by exploring Washington's original-art market, where more affordable work is available through emerging talents and lesser-known mid-career artists. The first step to becoming an art collector is, after all, totally free: Loiter at exhibitions in both commercial galleries and nonprofit alternative spaces, establish your tastes and familiarize yourself with what the area offers in terms of styles and prices.

"Educate, educate, educate yourself," says Norman Parish, director of Parish Gallery in Georgetown. "Get familiar with all the art galleries. The most important part is get to know who the artists are in the community, and you only do that by going to art events."

Galleries suitable for beginning art collectors on a budget are, according to local scenesters, the Torpedo Factory in Alexandria, the Arlington Arts Center, the District of Columbia Arts Center in Adams Morgan, the Randall Scott Gallery on 14th Street NW and Transformer Gallery on P Street NW (specifically its Flat File collection, which includes two-dimensional works 16 by 20 inches and smaller).

It's also good to pick a day to tour neighborhood galleries that open jointly. Spaces in Dupont Circle, Bethesda and Georgetown hold opening receptions on the first, second and third Fridays of the month, respectively. In a single day, you can hit 10 to 15 galleries in one area and get a feel for what's selling and for how much. Sign guest books, get on e-mail lists and talk to people.

"Galleries should not be intimidating," says Parish. "Just visit and get accustomed to coming to receptions, meeting the artists and getting into the society of people interested in art."

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But what's the least you should expect to pay for good original art in Washington? Is it always possible to find a great piece like mine for \$160 or less? Depends on whom you ask.

"You don't get anything decent under \$360," says Marc Zuver, exhibit director at Fondo del Sol in Dupont Circle. "More likely an artist is going to start at \$800. You've got to spend money, and you've got to have a good eye. If you put \$3,000 a year into buying first-rate art, you'll never lose money, and you'll have fun owning it. Twenty years later, it'll beat everything except gold as an investment."

Sounds like a rosy situation if you've got money to burn, but many of us can't justify laying down \$1,000 at once (or \$3,000 a year) for what is really a luxury item. Before you rule out buying a great work of art you're in love with, however, consider the options. There is generally a 10 percent leeway in price, and most reputable dealers will give regular customers a 10 to 20 percent discount right off the bat, says Chevy Chase artist and critic F. Lennox Campello, who has been involved in the art industry at almost every level, from dealer to gallerist to blogger (dcartnews.blogspot.com). And most galleries offer payment plans without interest.

When you're investing in art, though, take care to make the proper inquiries. "The most important question to ask is, 'Is this original work?'" says Campello. "Technology now can visually fool people into thinking that a reproduction is an original. When you see the word 'print,' be careful. If you have copies of a watercolor made on watercolor paper, that's not a print. That's a reproduction."

With proper inquiries comes proper budgeting. Aspiring collectors should set aside a certain amount to spend on art. Some say allotting \$500 per year can yield a respectable collection in five to 10 years. In 1990, Adams Morgan resident Philip Barlow started earmarking \$100 to \$200 a month for buying original art. Eighteen years and 262 pieces later, Barlow, a 48-year-old actuary, is a well-known area collector who buys almost exclusively from local artists. Why does he do it?

"I want to help promote the local art community, because I think it makes Washington a better place," says Barlow. "And it's kind of nice that I get the benefit of getting interesting artwork that I can look at whenever I want to."

■ ■ ■

Last year, Molly Brose of Adams Morgan painted three to five small watercolors a week and sold them for \$95 apiece on her blog, A Day's Work (www.mollybrose.com). She made hundreds of paintings, and buyers e-mailed her from across the country. If you have a small living space and a small budget, the Internet's the place to look. Artists who want to avoid the anxiety and overhead of galleries are selling through personal Web sites or through communal sites such as the Daily Painters Gallery (www.dailypainters.com).

"It's been so natural for artmakers and art buyers to find each other like this," says Brose, 27. "This is a way for art to be affordable and accessible. It's not intimidating to get on a blog."

Brose puts her own spin on the "painting a day" concept hatched by Richmond resident Duane Keiser, who was in the news a few years back for posting photos of original works daily on his blog (duanekeiser.blogspot.com) and auctioning them on eBay, a business model followed by hundreds of artist-bloggers today.

There are, after all, more people getting MFAs today than anytime in the past century, and not enough physical galleries to house them, says Lisa Hunter. She is the author of "The Intrepid Art Collector" (Three Rivers Press, 2006), a guide to finding, buying and appreciating art on a budget. So the Internet becomes a universal gallery for the talented but otherwise unconnected, as well as a way to bring together artists and buyers.

Hunter suggests the Web site 20x200 (www.20x200.com) as a resource for fine photography at cheap prices. Started last year by New York gallerist Jen Bekman, 20x200 issues 200 smaller reprints of new work and sells them for \$20 each.

"I thought \$1,000 was the entry point for serious photography, and now with 20x200, it's smaller size and cost," Hunter says. "Not every piece works small, but if you choose carefully, it's a terrific opportunity."

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When it comes down to it, you should go for the best art you can afford, says art consultant Allison Marvin, founder of the D.C.-based business Sightline (www.sightline.biz). She tells her clients to consider quality and how much they like a piece rather than quantity for the sake of filling up their walls. And for those wanting to amass a collection but lacking the space to exhibit one, there's an easy solution.

"Think about your art collection as a rotating, living collection," Marvin says. "Just because you decide to put something on the wall one day doesn't mean it's static and has to stay there forever. Maybe you have just one wall, but you can change it up every few months. You can enjoy more art than your space can allow."

Indeed, even a tiny bathroom with a teeny sink can be transformed into a personally curated exhibit. All it takes is the money that would be used to fix the leaky toilet.

Art-Filled Weekends

Want to get into the collecting field? Three weekends over the next two months offer chances to immerse yourself in art and pick up some collecting tips.

Collectors for a Cause Art Weekend, April 25-27. At the Pyramid Atlantic Art Center, meet new and seasoned art collectors, sample fine wines and buy original prints and artist books to benefit Pyramid Atlantic's arts education programs for young people in Montgomery County and the District. On April 26, art consultant Allison Marvin will speak at 1 p.m., and collector Philip Barlow will speak at 4 p.m. 8230 Georgia Ave., Silver Spring. Free. 301-608-9101. www.pyramidalartcenter.org.

Bethesda Fine Arts Festival, May 10-11. Now in its fifth year, this event, as well as Reston's (see below), is one of the most reputable outdoor art shows in the area. Both are juried, which means the participating artists were first vetted by judges. Woodmont Triangle, along Norfolk, Del Ray and Auburn avenues in Bethesda. Free. www.bethesda.org/arts/artsfestival.htm.

Northern Virginia Fine Arts Festival, May 17-18. More than 185 artists and 50,000 patrons are expected at the 17th annual event. Reston Town Center, 11900 Market St., Reston. Free; suggested donation \$5. 703-471-9242. www.restonarts.org/festival.

You Can Do It! Tips From 4 Artists.

Washington is a hive of artists whose work sells at reasonable prices. We talked to four professionals about their art and your money. They all agree that you can build a collection on a budget, but that you need time, patience, the discipline to save some cash and a solid, informed idea of what you want.

— Dan Zak

Joseph Craig English

Silk-screen printer, 61,
Washington Grove

Price range: \$50 to \$500.

Catch his work at: Any of the 15 regional shows he does every year, and in private and public spaces. (He installed a mural at the National Education Association at 16th and M streets NW and seven sculptures at Rockville Pike and Randolph Road in Rockville.) Also see www.josephcraigenglish.com.

On getting personal as a first step: "Go directly to the artist, tell them you're just getting started and you really love their work, and get some insight into the artist's thought process. Learn about what you're buying. Most artists are delighted to show their studios off. When you get some insight into who the artist is, it makes collecting a whole lot more fun."

On bargaining: "If someone says, 'What's your best price on this?' I just turn around and walk away. If someone comes and introduces themselves to me, they tell me they love my work, they have limited funds — if I can work with them, I will."

On buying gradually: "What always tickles me is people who come and say, 'We're starting an art collection, and we want to buy all this art.' Well, don't do that. You're 25 years old; you just got married. Start going to art shows and buy one piece of art a year. Buy the nicest piece of art you can afford."



"CANDY KITCHEN," \$200



Gretchen Schermerhorn

Printmaker and papermaker,
33, Silver Spring

Price range: \$100 to \$300.

Catch her work at: Pyramid Atlantic Art Center (8230 Georgia Ave., Silver Spring, 301-608-9101, www.pyramidatlanticartcenter.org).

Other job: Director of the paper mill and artistic collaborations at the Pyramid Atlantic.

On affordable ways to start collecting: "Book arts or printmaking are traditionally less expensive because there are multiples. Let's say I do a painting and sell it for \$1,000. Okay, that's a good chunk of money and I've sold it, but let's say I have an edition of 20 and sell for \$200 apiece. I can afford to sell that less expensively because I have multiples."

On starting with book arts: "There are low-tech zines made through xerography for \$5, [up] to very fine high-end bindings that have letterpress printed pages on handmade paper that are hand-bound in the thousands of dollars. It really just depends on what you like and also, of course, on what your budget can afford."

On going online: "Etsy.com is like eBay for artists. For every one piece that's not exciting, there are some real amazing pieces of art created and sold on Etsy."



"HARNESSING NATURE III," \$300

Quest Skinner

Painter, 30, Washington

Price range: \$20 to the thousands.

Catch her work at: Eastern Market on Saturdays and Sundays (usually selling from \$20 to \$200). Also visit www.myspace.com/questskinner or call 202-415-6684.

Other job: Art teacher for three area community centers.

On soulless decorating: "I would walk into friends' and neighbors' houses and say, 'They don't own any original art. They're still putting [reproduction prints] on their walls.' You're supposed to have at least the same wealth *inside* the house as you're spending *on* the house, and original art offers that."

On pricing original art: "Many of my clients are young, so I had to come up with figures most people could not so much reach but they could feel comfortable getting to. I have work for my college students and for the sophisticated 9-to-5 buyer."

On where to find art at a reasonable price: "It's always very interesting to go into a lot of coffee shops in the U Street area, Adams Morgan and Georgetown. A lot of people don't realize the artwork on the walls in their favorite restaurant is for sale. Nine times out of 10, if you give the artist a call and the pricing is too high, they may work with you."



"THE BLUES MAN," \$500



Alessandra Torres

Sculptor and multimedia
installation artist, 27,
Washington

Price range: \$1,000 to \$5,000. "My work tends to be pretty large."

Catch her work at: www.alessandratorres.com.

Other job: Recruiter for the Maryland Institute College of Art.

On Washington's status in the East Coast art corridor: "D.C. has consistently been an incredible place to exhibit work and sell because it's not as enormous as New York. You can really build a reputation and relationship with a viewer."

On not being too cool for school: "For me, the best way to start a collection is to visit the colleges. Within this area, you have these young artists that are producing top-quality work. For individuals who trust their own formal sensibilities instead of needing the artist to have a reputation, you can build something by visiting schools."

On asking for something less expensive: "Right now I'm dealing with somebody who saw a work I had in a show — a series of body prints that are huge, like four feet by six feet — and she really wanted a smaller one that would be less expensive. So I want to meet with her to see what I can do. . . . Ask an artist if they have similar work in a smaller dimension."



"SHADOW DRAWING," \$1,500



ARTIST PHOTOS BY JUANA ARIAS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST; WORKS FROM THE ARTISTS