

Rebel Collector Embraces Loisaida and Graffiti Art

by Jeanne Schinto

“People were shocked when I started buying contemporary,” said John P. Axelrod of Boston. “I was shocked.” Known for his pioneering collections of American modern decorative arts and fine arts by African-Americans, the 66-year-old retired lawyer/businessman claims never to have bought anything earlier than 1946 in his collecting life—until now.

So how did Axelrod get interested in works created by artists from two movements of the late

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20th-century—i.e., those based in the grassroots arts scene of New York City’s Lower East Side and those from uptown and downtown who brought their graffiti art inside? “I’ll tell you exactly how it happened,” he told a visitor to his Back Bay condominium, whose foyer and living-room walls are hung with big, bold, brightly colored paintings by artists with names like Crash, Daze, Futura 2000, Quik, and Lady Pink.

When Axelrod gave his American Modernism collection to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

(MFA) in 2009, he also donated to the institution an extensive research library to go with it. “And when I took the books away, I found this sheaf of Xeroxed pages that had been smushed against the wall of a bookshelf.” The pages had been sent to him several years earlier by New York City-based dealer Stephen Snyder of the Web Gallery along with a letter of introduction. The images showed meticulously painted scenes of neighborhoods in the Lower East Side—known as “Loisaida” in Latino or “Nuyoricana” parlance—by a Chinese-American artist whom Axelrod had never heard of, Martin Wong (1946-1999). The collector recalled his immediate reaction. “I said, ‘Oh my God, I love this!’”

“It would have been great if Martin Wong could have lived to see what has happened to his art and his reputation,” said Snyder, who knew the artist well and is a leading authority on his work today. “Nearly every major museum in the United States has a work by him. We’re talking about the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art [in New York City], Art Institute of Chicago, Houston, Yale, the Metropolitan [Museum of Art in New York City], and many others. It’s

happening for him. It really is.”

Axelrod wasn’t quite ready to buy a Wong, however. His walls were full. Then, in 2011, after the MFA, Boston acquired his collection of art by African-Americans in a gift-purchase arrangement, space was freed up, and he gave Snyder a call. “Remember me?” he said.

Even if one isn’t interested in creating a collection like this, it’s instructive to learn how Axelrod went about navigating what was new aesthetic territory for him. “Stephen is a great educator, and I worked with him to develop a game plan,” Axelrod said. “And then we went out and did it. We had a hit list. You can’t always get your hit list, but since we knew what we wanted, when something came up, we were able to just go and get it.”

It’s inspiring to marvel at Axelrod’s good timing, although he attributes it merely to good fortune. “I’m lucky that I got what I got,” he said. “We were lucky to get this stuff before everyone’s attention turned to it. You could not do this collection now. If I had started a year later...”

Indeed, these works have gone up in value markedly, partly abetted by the new interest that auction houses have shown. On October 16, 2012, Doyle New York held its first dedicated street art sale. Two weeks later in Los Angeles, Bonhams had what it termed an urban art auction. There are also a number of upcoming museum shows that will feature these artists and inevitably produce publicity and buzz, if not increased values. Not that Axelrod cares.

“People who worry primarily about whether the art they’re buying will appreciate are people who spoil art,” he said. “You buy it because you want to live with it. If it happens to appreciate...Yes, the Latin American art [another of his previous collections] appreciated. Yes, when I sold that, I gave myself a budget for this. But that’s not why I bought the Latin American art.” (In fact, he once tried to give that collection away, but the major museum to which he offered it wanted \$500,000 to support a curator of it. Axelrod said no.) “If you have to talk yourself into buying something, you shouldn’t buy it. Only buy what you love.”

The painting from that rediscovered sheaf of Martin Wong images that Axelrod loved best was a largely black-and-white composition called *Stevy*. In its upper right corner is one of Wong’s most celebrated motifs—a pair of kissing firefighters. The focal point of the 1990 acrylic is a mustachioed man named Stevy, known as Wong’s muse, wearing a firefighter’s helmet while he soaks in a bathtub.

Unfortunately, Snyder had already sold the painting, but in what Axelrod later dubbed a “Stevy moment,” that little technicality didn’t get in his way. “A Stevy moment is like a perfect storm,” he said. Snyder asked the clients if they were interested in reselling it. As it happened, they were. The deal was done, and that was the start of the collection.

Axelrod moved into full-scale Wong-hunt mode from that point, but there weren’t many more Stevy moments to savor. An openly gay man, Wong died relatively young (about a month shy of age 54) of an AIDS-related illness and hadn’t been prolific. Besides, museums were on the prowl for his work too.



John Axelrod and his Australian terrier, Myrna Loy, with (untitled by the artist) *Subway Door* by Lee Quinones (b. 1960). The work is acrylic, oil stick, and spray enamel on a 37¼" x 27¼" section of a wooden New York City subway door. “This was part of a door between subway cars,” said Axelrod. “When the city junked the cars, the artist bought the doors. The painting was done with brushes. It’s vintage Lee Quinones.”

Nonetheless, aided by Snyder and others, Axelrod bought several more paintings by Wong.

Two of them display Wong’s trademark brickwork. Row upon row appears in his many depictions of Lower East Side tenements. Trash piles and bashed-in chain-link fences form part of his urban landscapes’ reality, but labeled constellations appear often in the heavens above. The result is an otherworldly, visionary quality. Adding to that impression is the translucence of the bricks. Snyder said Wong achieved the effect by layering colors: “First black, over that green, over that burnt orange, over that gold.”

A third Wong painting now in the Axelrod



Above the window the narrow black-and-white *8 Street* is a collaboration by Keith Haring (1958-1990) and LA II (a.k.a. Angel Ortiz, b. 1967). “When I saw it, Stephen said, ‘That’s awfully big,’” Axelrod recalled. “I said, ‘I have the perfect place for it.’” Flanking the windows are 1983 works by Linwood “Quik” Felton (on left and in detail below) and Chris “Daze” Ellis (on right and in detail). Daze’s *Angry Images Vs. the Letter* is spray enamel and acrylic on canvas, 52" x 36". Said Axelrod of its meaning, “Transitioning from tagging to painting was crucial for a lot of these artists. Here Daze is making the transition, fighting with using images versus using letters.”



David Wojnarowicz (1954-1992), *History Keeps Me Awake at Night*, 1986, acrylic and spray enamel and printed paper collage on panel, 67" x 78½".



David Wojnarowicz, *Tuna*, 1983, acrylic on paper (grocery store advertising poster), 40" x 30". While most of the collection was brokered for Axelrod by Stephen Snyder, this item came from Gracie Mansion, who represented the artist earlier on. Axelrod described this dealer as “legendary.” In 1982, she became one of the first to establish a gallery in the Lower East Side, famously in her East Village apartment’s bathroom. Mansion, who took her name from the New York City mayor’s official residence, mounted three well-attended shows in this unorthodox space before establishing a legitimate gallery nearby. The neighborhood was raw, dilapidated, not at all what it is today. Yet given her success, dozens of other gallerists followed her bold lead, and by the mid-1980’s, the East Village art scene had burgeoned. Mansion later moved to SoHo and then Chelsea, before closing her gallery in 2002 to concentrate on private dealing and the secondary market.

collection, *Cupcake and Paco (Corot)*, is from a series about men's prison life, influenced by the work of poet and playwright Miguel Piñero (1946-1988), author of *Short Eyes*. In 1984, Wong painted another version of the scene; that acrylic on canvas now belongs to the Syracuse University art collection. Axelrod's version, which Wong painted in the same medium in 1988, is in a secondhand giltwood frame. "Martin would go out and find old frames in the trash," said Axelrod. "That one says 'Corot' on it, so that's its [alternative] title—*Corot*."

Soon Axelrod got interested in another big name from Loisaída, David Wojnarowicz (pronounced wanna-ROW-vitch). Wojnarowicz (1954-1992) was known for, among other things, taking grocery store posters and adding his own imagery to them. An example, *Tuna*, hangs in Axelrod's study and has an emerald-green background with black lettering advertising Chicken of the Sea. Superimposed over that is Wojnarowicz's cartoonish portrait of a Wild West outlaw. On the study's opposite wall is a Wojnarowicz triptych, a spray-painted stencil whose central imagery is one the artist used repeatedly—a burning house.

Axelrod has never before collected photography but now has acquired some important Wojnarowicz examples. He said, "I know David Kiehl [curator of prints and special collections at the Whitney], who is the leading expert on Wojnarowicz. He suggested I get some of the photos from Wojnarowicz's 'Sex Series.' Stephen got me the complete set of eight vintage gelatin silver prints, each signed and in its original frame designed by Wojnarowicz. To the best of my knowledge, there are only two other complete sets known, and both of them are in museums."

A photographic portrait of Wojnarowicz by Peter Hujar (1934-1987), Wojnarowicz's mentor and one-time lover, is part of this new collection. So is Hujar's photo of the drag queen Divine (1945-1988), who is posed as an odalisque in "civilian" attire. Axelrod went after Hujar because he is another important part of the Loisaída story. So are George Condo, Kenny Scharf, Ronnie Cutrone, Richard Hambleton, Donald Baechler, and Luis Frangella, all of whom are now represented in the collection with one or more works.

"He focused only on a very small group," said Snyder. "He wanted the best art from each particular artist, and that's what he got."

"Loisaída" became the official alternative for "the Lower East Side" in 1987, when the city sanctioned Loisaída Avenue as another designation for Avenue C. By then, the term had been in use for years, popularized by Bittman Rivas (1939-1992), a Puerto Rican community organizer, actor, and writer who published it in a poem in 1974.

Axelrod insists, as does Snyder, that to understand the art of Loisaída, it's crucial to understand the milieu in which the Loisaída artists, few of whom are Latino, lived and worked. "The Lower East Side, including the East Village, literally is a village—a little melting pot of a place," Snyder said. "It's a ten-block area, where the artists associated with each other in one way or another." Every night in this last section of New York City to be gentrified, there were poetry readings, performance art events, and music-making by all kinds of people. It was a time when anyone felt entitled to call himself or herself an artist. It didn't take conservatory study or a fine arts degree.

Nor did artists restrict themselves to one form over another. For example, although Wojnarowicz in 1980 had already begun making collages, drawings, and photographs, he did not think of himself as a visual artist. He would have identified himself as a writer (a poet, letter writer, and journal keeper) and member of a band. The period was also one characterized by squatting in abandoned buildings, street crime (petty and otherwise), and public sex. It was pre-AIDS and then epidemic. Like Wong, Wojnarowicz died of an AIDS-related illness, as did Hujar.

Given its birthright, it goes without saying that Loisaída art is, much like Abstract Expressionism, *sui generis* American. But Axelrod wants to say it anyway, "So much American art is derivative. This is not derivative. It wasn't influenced by European art. This is American art period."

While immersed in Loisaída art, Axelrod was simultaneously acquiring works for his new collection's second part—graffiti art. "When I saw them on Stephen's Web site [www.webgallerynyc.com], it was chemical," Axelrod said. "It hit me on the side of my head. I loved it. Then Stephen said, 'Why don't we get you some vintage ones?'"

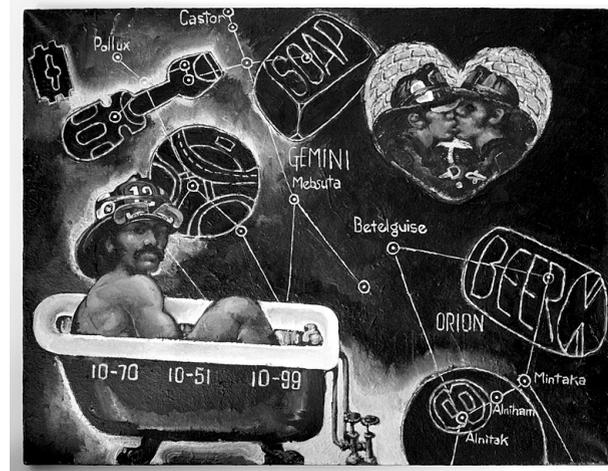
To be sure, several hundred people could be considered graffiti artists. Starting in the 1970's, all manner of kids tagged buildings and subway cars with their balloon-lettered pseudonyms or spray-painted those large public surfaces with more complex images. It was an art movement of the underground, illegal and often dangerous. Then, toward the end of that decade, the best of those artists moved indoors and started to work smaller scale on things like traditional canvases.

They had an incentive. When the "Wall Street types" got involved in collecting art in the 1980's, Snyder recalled, many of them were interested in graffiti art. "All of a sudden a demand was created," and galleries cropped up.

The first documented show of graffiti art at a gallery



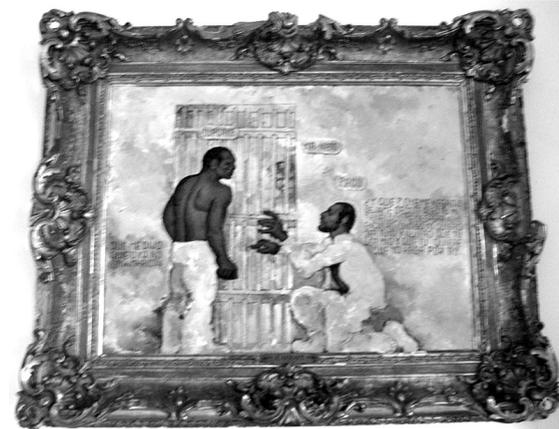
Art of Steel by John "Crash" Matos (b. 1965), 1985, spray enamel on linen, 53" x 62".



Martin Wong (1946-1999), Stevy, 1990, acrylic on linen, 28" x 36". Photo courtesy Web Gallery.



Martin Wong, Psychiatrists Testify: Demon Dogs Drive Man to Murder, 1980, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48".



Martin Wong, Cupcake & Paco (Corot), 1988, acrylic on canvas, 18" x 24". It was bought from Schlesinger Gallery, New York City.



Martin Wong, The Babysitter, 1998, acrylic on linen, 22" x 26".



Chris "Daze" Ellis (b. 1962), Pressure, spray enamel, acrylic, and paint marker on canvas, 54" x 52".

was in 1980. *Graffiti Art Success* took place at Fashion Moda in the Bronx and was curated by graffiti artist Crash (also known as John Matos). The year 1980 is also the year that by default became the starting date of works that Axelrod acquired for his graffiti art collection.

"Nothing much was available until 1980," said Axelrod. "Except for Jean-Michel Basquiat, who did some early smaller-scale drawings, these people didn't do much work prior to 1980 on something you could buy. I don't have room for a subway car in here."

Besides Basquiat (1960-1988), Keith Haring (1958-1990) is the graffiti artist most people know best. "Basquiat and Haring—those are the bull's-eyes," Snyder said, and Axelrod naturally wanted examples of each for his collection, and got them.

"There were no guidelines for the Loisaída artists," said Axelrod. "It was just what I loved." The graffiti artists' works, by contrast, had parameters, one of which was scale.

Snyder said, "Being an art dealer myself, I could see the dealers' influence" on the artists after they got involved with galleries. And one of the things that got influenced was size. There were lots of paintings that John was interested in, but there was no room for them in his condo, because they're enormous."

The works got bigger for a couple of reasons, Snyder said. When graffiti artists started using modest-size canvases, the works lost their "wow" factor, he said. Potential clients noticed and were disappointed. "Going large scale gave them back the 'wow' factor, like the 'wow' produced when you'd see this art on the side of a wall or subway car. Many of Kenny Scharf's paintings at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery were just enormous." These works also got bigger because dealers could charge more for them, Snyder said. "It's basic marketing, and it happens in every art sector."

Another guideline Axelrod set for his graffiti art

collection was date-related. The works all come from a four-year window that terminates in 1984, which is the year that gallerist Sidney Janis (1896-1989) took graffiti art to Art Basel. "As far as I'm concerned, that's when the thrill is gone," Axelrod said.

Snyder said, "After Art Basel, these artists, who had come from this grass-roots movement, entered the mainstream. The purity of it was gone." What is more, the art changed, and the changes had to do with more than scale. "The movement after that was fragmented, because these artists followed their ambitions. When they were given the opportunity to work with an art dealer or an art company, they took it, and that in turn took them in different directions."

To be sure, the Loisaída artists went their own ways. Perhaps it was inevitable, because they emerged from such a specific time and such a tiny place. To put it another way, that center could not possibly hold for long and didn't. Some believe that the Loisaída artists and the graffiti artists should be considered as a unity instead of representatives of separate movements. This is notwithstanding the overlap in the two rosters. Scholars and museum curators here and abroad will inevitably be the final arbiters.

Ironically, Europe led the way when it came to collecting American graffiti art and showing it in museums. In 1983, an exhibition called *New York Graffiti* was organized at the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam and it traveled to the Groninger Museum, also in the Netherlands. The first museum survey of graffiti art at a major American museum didn't take place until 28 years later,



Three of Axelrod's five works by Wong in place in the living room.

from April 17 to August 8, 2011, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Curated by the controversial curator Jeffrey Deitch, it was called *Art in the Streets* and, according to the Web site (www.moca.org), remains the best-attended show in the museum's history.

Right now through August 18, the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, in association with Le CENTQUATRE, is hosting a wide-ranging retrospective devoted to Keith Haring. It includes more than 250 works, making it one of the largest presentations of Haring's works ever. In 2015, the Bronx Museum of Art will present a solo retrospective of Martin Wong's work, curated by Antonio Sergio Bessa and Alexandra Chang. It will be accompanied by a major catalog. Sooner than that, in 2014, there will be a show of Axelrod's Loisaida collection at the Addison Gallery of American Art on the campus of Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, where Axelrod went to school.

Museum interest is also growing in lesser-known artists of these ranks. "Just before he died, Martin Wong gave a collection of graffiti art, over a hundred paintings and lots of ephemera from that movement, to the Museum of the City of New York," said Snyder. "Martin worked at the local Pearl Paint. He was friends with all the artists. He had an enormous collection of other artists' works." Currently, the museum is conducting a survey of that collection, and a catalog is being

produced. *City as Canvas: New York City Graffiti from the Martin Wong Collection* was written by Carlo McCormick and Sean Corcoran with contributions by Lee Quinones, Sacha Jenkins, and Christopher "Daze" Ellis, and will be published by Skira Rizzoli in October 2013.

Asked what he thinks of straight graffiti, the prosecutable kind, Axelrod said, "If you don't own the building, I'm sorry, it's vandalism, but it still can be great art. I think that cities like Miami, New York, and Boston, which make walls available, are very forward looking." (He noted, for example, that Os Gêmeos, graffiti artist twin brothers from Brazil, were given walls to paint in Boston while their work was being shown at the Institute of Contemporary Art.)

He realizes that he's somewhat hypocritical. "On the one hand, I believe it's vandalism; on the other, my collection stops once the art goes mainstream. I'm sure Futura 2000 was going to the subway yards and spraying trains at the same time that he was doing the piece I have of his, which was done in 1980. I think there was a certain energy when these kids were trespassing in the subway yards, taking the chance that they'd step on the third rail or that they'd get busted. That energy carried over, for a while, into their gallery art."

The latest piece to enter the collection was one more major painting by Martin Wong, a portrait of Divine to complement the photo by Hujar. And with that, Axelrod said, he considers



Lenny "Futura 2000" McGurr (b. 1955), 1980, untitled, spray enamel on plywood, 48" x 96".

his new collection nearly finished. (Note to dealers: he's still looking for a work by Jenny Holzer.) "If I learned anything from my past collections, I learned one thing—self restraint. No storage. I wasn't going to buy more than I could have on my walls."

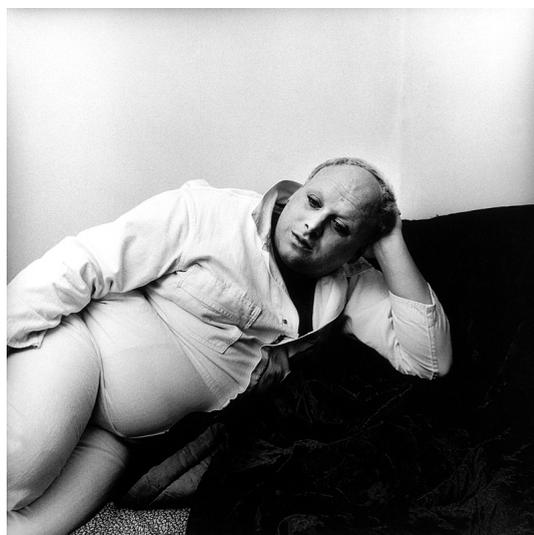
Some vestiges of Axelrod's past collections remain. There are, for example, a Walter Hancock sculpture in the foyer and a Jazz bowl by Viktor Schreckengost in his dining area. And he has not allowed the new collection to encroach on his bedroom, where he still has paintings by his early loves—Paul Cadmus, George Tooker, Jared French, and

Pavel Tchelitchew. "And they're all twelve out of ten," Axelrod said of the paintings.

Was the new collection foretold in any way by the previous collections? Is there a link? "No," he replied without hesitation. "But I would like to think that if a young Paul Cadmus had lived in the Lower East Side... he would have been in the subway yards." He paused, then said as if to himself, "Paul Cadmus was a rebel, and so am I."



Richard Hambleton (b. 1954), untitled (*Marlboro Country Box*), 1984, acrylic and paper (Marlboro advertisement) on canvas board, 24 1/4" x 12".



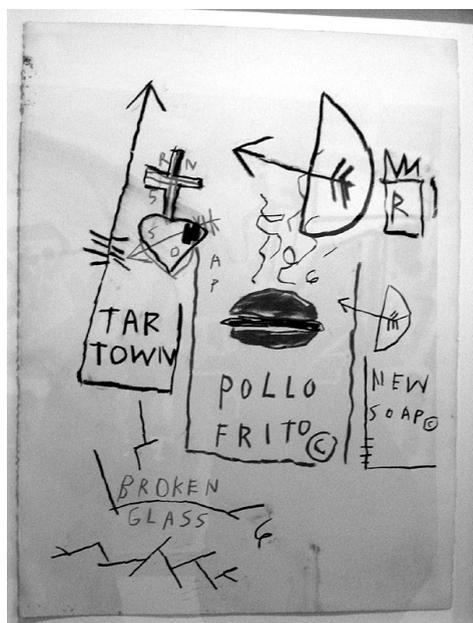
A photograph of Divine by Peter Hujar and a painting of Divine by Martin Wong. Photos courtesy Web Gallery (Wong) and Matthew Marks Gallery of New York (Hujar).



Donald "Dondi" White (1961-1998), *Archeology Rewards*, 1982, spray enamel on canvas, 58 1/2" x 51".



Keith Haring (1958-1999), untitled subway chalk drawing, 1981-85, chalk on archival paper, 45 1/4" x 29 3/4". Photo courtesy Web Gallery.



Axelrod's Jean-Michel Basquiat drawing.



Ronnie Cutrone (b. 1948), *Stress Study*, 1983, acrylic on Bainbridge board, 40" x 30".



Kenny Scharf (b. 1958), *Wacko Picabo*, 1984, acrylic on paper, 24" x 16".