

CHAPTER THREE

Sparks! The William T. Kemper Collecting Initiative

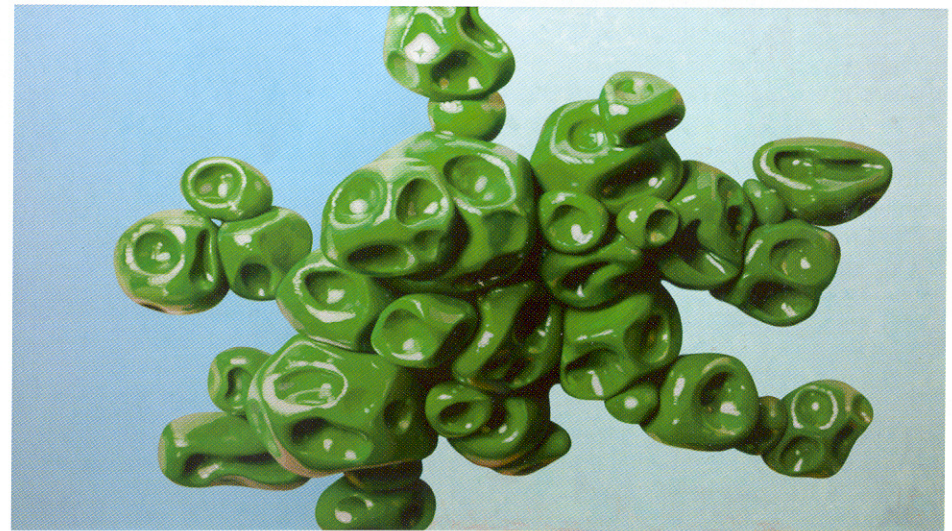
by Blair Schulman

As the world economy takes its toll on basic goods and services, the art market continues its ascent into the stratosphere; thus, acquisition requires a nimble balance of logic and emotion. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri, is currently in an interesting position with their latest phase of collecting, allowing the two forces to run together, considering the mix the best of all worlds.

The William T. Kemper Collecting Initiative, which began in 1999, is a 10-year, \$10 million gift, underwritten by the William T. Kemper Foundation—Commerce Bank, Trustee, with \$1 million to be spent each year until 2009. The first collecting phase was made of long-term acquisitions established through the Friends of Art. The second involved the Hall Family Foundation and the creation of the Kansas City Sculpture Park on the museum's grounds. In the third phase of the museum's collecting, Nelson-Atkins Sanders Sosland Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art Jan Schall, with the guidance of Robert Storr, dean of Yale University School of Art and former senior curator at New York's Museum of Modern Art, has purchased 36 works, averaging about four pieces a year, that culminated in the public exhibition, *Sparks! The William T. Kemper Collecting Initiative*, May 3 through July 20, 2008.

Schall says she wished to transform and finalize the modern contemporary collection by filling in its gaps. She looked to the strength of the museum's permanent works and determined which artists were missing from the full canon. The initiative brings new light and dialogue into the collection, all the while continuing its apparent mission to enhance and educate. "We wanted ... (and) needed benchmark examples that approximated the best of each period, each movement."

Wanting to ensure there was a strong representation of female artists, Schall acquired work from Kiki Smith (*Hard Soft Bodies*, 1992). She has also acquired strong examples of the Surrealist movement, totemic works that broke down barriers of what once might have been considered ordinary and obvious but that thrust us into a new way of looking at the world. Although it appears this movement is dominated by male artists, Schall has acquired important Surrealist works by Louise Bourgeois (*End of Softness*, 1967) and Dorothea Tanning (*Emma*, 1970), both of whom are still alive and working well into their 90s. Schall also expressed the wish to continue acquiring more conceptual pieces, supporting such movements in a variety of ways and using the Bloch Building, with its nearly seamless galleries, to full advantage. Rounding things out, the Surrealist pieces also include works by Man Ray (*Object Indestructible*, 1923/1975) and one of the series of Marcel Duchamp's *Box in a Valise* (1963), the latter acquired from New York art dealer Frances Nallman.



Above: Marcel Duchamp, French (1887-1968). *Box in a Valise*, 1963, wood, cardboard, paper and plastic. Purchase: acquired through the generosity of the William T. Kemper Foundation—Commerce Bank, Trustee

Below: Alexander Ross, American, (b. 1960). *Untitled*, 2004, oil on canvas. Purchase: acquired through the generosity of the William T. Kemper Foundation—Commerce Bank, Trustee

Amid fierce competition between museums — trying to engage the viewing public — and collectors with bottomless pockets, it falls to the gallery owners and the artists themselves to make the final decision on how they want the work represented. When auction houses consistently announce record-breaking sales, one wonders if it disheartens the curator looking at the big picture. Does it mobilize one to seek out work that is not brash or trendy but is transformative and will illuminate and satisfy the greater palate? Great pieces are certainly out there, and not all of them need be by Gerhard Richter, Francis Bacon, or Lucian Freud.

Actually, an artist's work considered fashionable today and sold to an individual collector for tens of millions of dollars might not be seen by the public for years, or



Left: Elizabeth Murray, American, (1940-2007). *Art Part*, 1981, oil on 22 canvases. Purchase: acquired through the generosity of the William T. Kemper Foundation—Commerce Bank, Trustee; Right: El Anatsui, Ghanaian (b. 1944). *Dusasa I*, 2007, found aluminum and copper wire, approximate dimensions: 288" x 360". The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: acquired through the generosity of the William T. Kemper Foundation—Commerce Bank, Trustee, 2008.2. Photo: Robert Greenspan. Courtesy of the Jack Shaiman Gallery

even decades, unless its new owner chooses to lend it to an institution. For this initiative, however, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art acquired pieces from exhibitions, commercial galleries, auction houses, and directly from artists, enabling the museum's nearly 400,000 annual visitors to experience a more universal scope of work. The public has the full benefit of viewing great works of art at once. Stories make them even greater.

When museums acquire a new piece of art, curators establish its provenance (the chain of ownership after the artist). This is essential to underscoring a work's authenticity. The older a work of art is, the richer its provenance may be. Moreover, when a particular piece has an especially interesting provenance, its value may increase. Says Schall, "With contemporary art, the work often passes from the artist through a gallery directly into our collection."

For example, Elizabeth Murray's *Art Part* (1981) was purchased directly from her studio. This particular work represented a disquieting moment in her life, and Murray was unsure about parting with the painting. The

painting itself is a three-dimensional image seemingly shattered into 22 canvases and clearly showcasing the gamut of emotions Murray has revealed throughout her career and her ingenuity in working within the confines of limited studio space; *Art Part* was created in the artist's tiny kitchen in SoHo, New York City.

In 2003, Kerry James Marshall was completing his *Memento Number 5*, the last in a series depicting the emotional charge of the civil rights movement, which Marshall, who grew up in Watts during the 1960s, experienced up close. Working through the Jack Shaiman Gallery, the museum was placed on a potential buyers' list while this piece was still being painted. The piece represents a closure to Kerry's series and to an interpretation of an era, and the museum waited over a year to finally make the purchase.

Traveling from Nigeria then to Italy to be installed at the Venice Biennale, an expected public favorite addition to the collection is El Anatsui's *Dusasa I* (2007), an enormous sculptural tapestry of found aluminum bottle cap labels and copper wire, weighing 250 pounds.

The flexible and intricate, nearly lace-like pattern is a 180-degree turn from elimination in its barest minimum to Richard Tuttle's *Wave* (1964-65) and Donald Judd's *Untitled (Progression)* (1970). Spare and sober, the mathematica of these Minimalist pieces are as austere as the tapestry is opulent. From gallery to gallery, the curating shown throughout has proven how bold and diverse this collecting has been.

The William T. Kemper Collecting Initiative continues for one more year. In that time, as the museum's "wish list" shortens then grows again, revelation and spontaneity mature in tandem with the realities of the art world. The need to educate, entertain, inspire, and awe the public will never cease. •

Based in Kansas City, Missouri, Blair Schulman is a writer and author of *Love Letters To Myself*. He has been contributing to *Review* since 2002, and his work also has appeared in *Kansas City Home Design*.