

 WATCH VIDEOS
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AMERICAN
art
COLLECTOR





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Daniel Graves' *Storm on the Plain*, 2013, oil on board, hangs at the foot of the stairs. Sarah Lamb's *Old Books*, 2013, oil on canvas, is above the bookcase in the living room.



REFINED MINIMALISM

THE CRAFTSMAN-STYLE HOME OF
THIS LONG ISLAND COLLECTOR IS ADORNED
WITH FINE REALISM PAINTINGS.

BY JOHN O'HERN PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANCIS SMITH



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Our collector bought a house on Long Island in 2005. “I wasn’t thinking about a major renovation,” he confesses. “I completed the first project, repairing a defect in one of the walls. Then the other walls looked shabby next to it. It was a slippery slope. I did most of the woodwork myself and chose the craftsman style because a beginning woodworker could do it convincingly—most of the cuts are right angles.”

His confidence had grown by the time he noticed the beautiful grain in an old Douglas fir joist he took out of the kitchen. It now graces the fireplace surround in a design he drew up and constructed himself. True to his minimalist aesthetic, the mantelpiece is only about 2 inches deep. “It’s just a frame around the fireplace and it’s useless for doodads.”

Five years later he was done. “I went for the simplest visual effect I could get. In my head I had an idea of what I wanted it to look like and I just plodded on,” he says. He had admired the American Craftsman aesthetic of simplicity of form, natural materials and fine craftsmanship. He furnished his home with furniture from Stickley, echoing or replicating the



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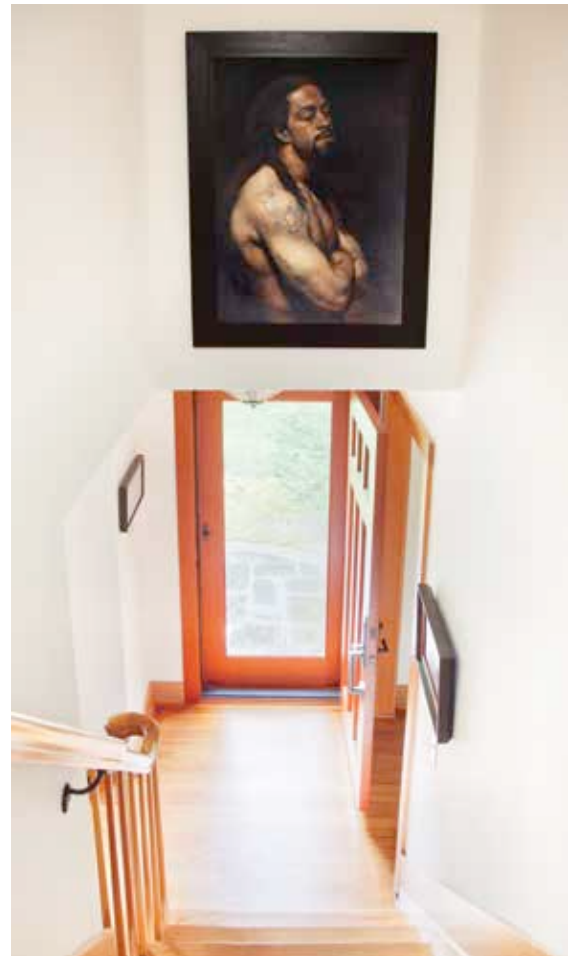
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In the breakfast room are Sarah Lamb's *Antique Rooster Weathervane*, 2013, oil on canvas, and Kristy Gordon's *Soul Possee*, 2013, oil on canvas.

3
Michael Kotasek's *Gothic Revival*, 2010, oil on canvas, hangs in the family room. Through the doorway is Daniela Astone's *Looking Glass*, 2010, oil on board. Sarah Lamb's *Antique Grasshopper Weathervane*, 2013, oil on canvas, is to the right.

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Venetian Reflections, circa 1890, oil on board, by Andrew Fisher Bunner (1841-1897), is in the family room. Above the desk is Kevin Sanders' *Near Panzano in the Chianti*, 2009, oil on canvas.

5
Kyle Kyeong Keun No's *Portrait of Kevin*, 2015, oil on canvas, is above the stairs.



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designs of Gustav Stickley (1858-1942), the leading light of the American arts and crafts movement.

While he was remodeling he started buying art. By chance, he had met Laura Grenning of Grenning Gallery in Sag Harbor. Friends of his were renting a house full of contemporary art being kept there while the owners finished their new home. When they were ready, they took the art away. The renters approached Grenning to bring some paintings over for them to consider for their now empty walls. Grenning suggested they invite some friends over to see what she was bringing by. "By chance I wangled an invitation," the collector admits. "I saw some wonderful paintings and really liked a painting by Kevin Sanders, *Near Panzano in the Chianti*, but didn't think I would be able to afford it."

He later approached Grenning to show him some paintings for his own home, especially the Sanders that he had admired. He found it wasn't as expensive as he had thought and bought it, asking Grenning to store it while he finished work on his home. What he thought would be several months turned into several years.

She often invites clients to events at

museums and galleries and invited him to an event in New York City. "As we were walking up the street her phone rang. It was a call from MME Fine Art inviting her to an open house that night. They said, 'Come if you can.' We went!" There he found a 19th-century view of Venice by Andrew Fisher Bunner (1841-1897). "I loved the vermilion of the sails reflected in the water and the way he rendered the sky. I bought it on impulse." He balked at the elaborate gold leaf frame—the opposite of his Craftsman simplicity—but has kept it because of its authenticity. "But it's ostentatious," he remarks.

"I had never collected before," he explains. "I never had the means to collect." He has an astute visual memory but never having studied art or art history he "wouldn't remember the names of the artists. We had a book on art history at home that went from the caves at Lascaux up to the 20th century. Today, when I see something I like or that seems notable, I look into the artist to learn more. Nine times out of 10 when I send an image to Laura she knows the artist already."

After he purchased the Kevin Sanders, Grenning sent him a postcard of Sarah Lamb's *Antique Grasshopper Weathervane*.



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Sarah Lamb's *Leeks and Earthenware*, 2014, oil on canvas, hangs in the guest room. Daniela Astone's *Looking Glass*, 2010, oil on board, is in the hall.

7
Kevin Sanders' *Moonlight Country Road*, 2013, oil on canvas, hangs above the desk in the study. Kyle Kyeong Keun No's five portraits of the collector, oil on panels, are on the desk. *Father's Miter Saw*, 2014, oil on canvas, by John Morfis, is through the doorway.

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A Double Portrait, 2013, by Angel Ramiro Sanchez and Melissa Franklin Sanchez. Each artist painted the other.



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“I wasn’t interested in sculpture,” he explains, “but then I realized it was a painting. I bought that and another of her weathervane paintings. She used the same box to stand the weathervanes on in both paintings. I love that box. Sarah’s paintings have a quality that I always look for,” he continues. “Looking at her paintings you can always imagine looking through a window into another room or into another world.”

Every year the New York Academy of Art hosts a ball. “It’s held in the artists’ studio with its cinderblock walls and its paint-spattered industrial sinks,” he recounts. “I wore my best clothes. It was unbelievable what the students and other guests were wearing. It was spectacular. We went by the studio of one young artist and I saw a series of 10 2-by-3-inch self-portraits he had done. The next day I asked Laura to

check into buying them. He had already sold five so I bought the remaining five. I also commissioned the artist, Kyle Kyeong Keun No, to paint five little portraits of me.

“The next year we went back and he and the other students had all done portraits of the same model,” he recalls. “I was fascinated by how they all looked like the model but had the imagination and the emotions of the artists in them. I bought *Portrait of Kevin* because I love the illuminated man and the background fading into darkness.”

He purchased Michael Kotasek’s *Gothic Revival* because it reminded him of the illustrations in a book he had as a child. The book was based on Victor Herbert’s operetta *Babes in Toyland*. “There is something mysterious, a kind of enchantment in the painting. I can imagine the trees being almost like sentient beings,” the collector says. Kotasek says there is always a story in his paintings, not always an obvious one but one hidden just below the surface. Perhaps the collector is on to something.

One painting recalls his labor of love renovating his house into his home. John Morfis writes, “Each painting, although a portrait of a tired hand tool, is really my outward expression of the passion I have for objects that serve a humble, yet meaningful purpose. I cannot help but relate to worn-out, forgotten tools the way one might reminisce with old photographs.” His painting, *Father’s Miter Saw* reminds the collector of his own miter saw. “But,” he says, “mine has a plastic handle.” ●

John O’Hern, who has retired after 30 years in the museum business, specifically as the Executive Director and Curator of the Arnot Art Museum, Elmira, N.Y., is the originator of the internationally acclaimed Representing Representation exhibitions which promote realism in its many guises. John was chair of the Artists Panel of the New York State Council on the Arts. He writes for gallery publications around the world, including regular monthly features on Art Market Insights and on Sculpture in Western Art Collector magazine.

