



HOUSE OF STYLE
Physician and arts scion Fred Ognibene regularly rotates his collection of contemporary art at his Meridian Hill home, showcasing an elite array of local talent.

Frame Works

Contemporary art advocate Fred Ognibene can't keep his collection to himself.

| By *Tiffany Jow* |
| Photography by *Greg Powers* |

About to set off for Art Basel Miami Beach, Fred Ognibene already can't wait to get home. With a passion for collecting cutting-edge art, he makes room on his walls, in nooks and atop tables for each new find. This is, of course, until he reaches a saturation point and has to banish more than a few great loves to storage. With more than 250 pieces rotating through his Meridian Hill condo—and the hope of finding a few more gems at the festival—Ognibene's collection has made his expanse a beloved isle of style in DC's grassroots creative pool. It has also earned the 58-year-old physician the rank as one of the District art scene's most valuable players.

A critical care specialist who oversees education and training programs, as well as strategic partnerships, for the National Institutes of Health, Ognibene recently became the Washington Project for the Arts chairman of the board, where he's quickly begun administering another kind of critical care. Ognibene is aiming to break WPA records for raising money, as the organization dedicated to connecting DC artists with collectors from around the globe has begun a search for its first permanent exhibition space in more than a decade. He's become famous for constantly flinging open his doors for dinner parties, cocktail receptions and fundraising soirées. The timing couldn't be better for the recent renovation of his art-plastered pad.

With the help of Georgetown-based interior designer Robert Shields, a close friend and fellow WPA board member, Ognibene created an environment that optimizes the 70-some artworks currently on display in his 2,100-square-foot home. Shields oversaw the installation of new spotlights, wall extensions and high beams, upgraded the kitchen and morphed the guest bedroom into a new media center for Ognibene's nascent collection of video art. The result is both stunning and refined, a rare yet inspiring instance of someone truly living with art.

Instead of showcasing pieces that feel just out of reach, both literally and figuratively, works are placed at eye-level and rotated regularly. "I don't buy works to sequester them or as a kind of investment," Ognibene says. "I get them because I like to look at them and share them with others."

"Everything about the space is done to showcase and enhance the art," says WPA Executive Director Lisa Gold, who deems Ognibene one of the most passionate collectors she's ever met. "Instead of your traditional home, where the art is a decorative item or an afterthought, for Fred, it's the center of everything."

Ognibene's penchant for emerging talent is obvious. His outside collection includes paintings by area artists Maggie Michael, CONTINUED...



SPACE RACE
Ognibene travels throughout the world to source emerging artists. When in town, his home functions as a salon for Washington's culturati.

“Everything about the space is done to showcase and enhance the art,” says WPA Executive Director Lisa Gold, who deems Ognibene one of the most passionate collectors she’s ever met. “Instead of your traditional home, where art is a decorative item or an afterthought, for Fred, it’s the center of everything.”

...CONTINUED Katie Miller and Erik Sandberg, a watercolor by New York-based Balint Zsako and works by Washington-based Patrick McDonough and Kathryn Cornelius. “I am piqued by getting to know younger artists,” Ognibene says. “It also gives me a chance to interact with galleries a bit more, as they are keen on new discoveries.” Ognibene estimates he buys 10 to 30 works a year, which adorn his Bethesda doctor’s office, DC residence and digs in Miami, where he stays during annual visits to Art Basel.

He’ll travel to Paris, New York’s Armory show, London’s Frieze Art Fair and any other city that allows him to exercise his left-brain pursuits. The tastemaker has an excellent track record of discovering artists who later emerge in prominent collections. “I really rely on my instincts when it comes to what I collect,” Ognibene says. “But I still try to listen and do my research.” Such was the case when he met contemporary collector Mera Rubell, who, at a dinner party, challenged him to be more adventurous in his collecting. “She gave me that extra push I needed, and I listened.”

The Jamestown, N.Y.-born Ognibene was a stranger to the art world, until moving to New York City in the late ’70s for a medical residency at Cornell University’s Weill Cornell Medical College. It was an era when galleries were popping up everywhere and artist-run

spaces were propelling talents like Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol, all of whom helped ignite Ognibene’s fascination with art. An NIH fellowship brought him to DC, where one of his roommates was an MFA student at American University. With her, he began to meet local artists, learn about the WPA and develop an insider’s perspective of the local arts scene. He bought his first piece in 1984 from Alexandria’s Torpedo Factory and hasn’t looked back.

As he rounds out the first of a three-year term as WPA chair, after nearly 20 years of involvement, he’s prepping for the edgy org’s Coup d’Espace, where local artist Dan Tulk will mount his first solo show in January. “We stick to fulfilling our mission,” Ognibene says. “I am happy to report that we’re really at our best.”

With nearly half of his collection created by local artists, Ognibene is determined to further local energy. “The DC arts scene has been historically underappreciated, but suddenly there’s a lot more going on,” he says. As his zeal for contemporary art continues to grow, he anticipates even more traffic in his newly curated home. “I want to remain engaged with colleagues at museums, nonprofits and galleries,” Ognibene says. “If they ask me to open up my doors and I’m able to do so, then I’ll do it—I feel that very strongly.” ■