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Fred Ognibene, an art lover and collector, poses next to his most recent purchase from a show at Conner Contemporary Art, "Little Boy Blue and His Comely Cremello," by Baltimore artist Katie Miller. To his left is a work by Michael Dotson. (Evy Mages/FOR THE WASHINGTON POST)

Fred Ognibene, D.C. art collector: 'He buys what he loves, but there's a vision'

By Rona Marech September 2, 2011

Fred Ognibene calculated that it would take 89 spotlights to give the artworks in his apartment the lighting he thinks they deserve. And so, in pursuit of this well-illuminated dream, he has turned his home into a mini construction site. The furniture is shrouded in plastic, the walls are bare and everything is coated in a fine layer of dust.

That's stressful for a highly organized, meticulously groomed person. But on a recent evening, Ognibene, a physician and one of Washington's many private art collectors, was exuding his signature enthusiasm as he whisked around his 2,100-square-foot, two-bedroom Adams Morgan apartment, apologizing and brushing off dust.

"Isn't it great?" he exclaimed about a painting partially obscured by bubble wrap. Then: "You have to see this in real time," he called out as he retrieved a piece from storage, "because he's such an amazing painter." Later, holding up another work, he simply said, "I love this."

A swaggering, flashy, know-it-all, filthy-rich art collector: That's not Dr. Fred, as many of the artists he has befriended affectionately call him. He's not trying to make a fortune or a self-promotional splash. He spends money on art, but he does it on his salary at the National Institutes of Health, where he has specialized in critical care for 29 years and oversees the clinical center's educational and training programs. His career at the NIH has helped mold him into a Washington loyalist — about 50 percent of his collection is by local artists.

And he loves going to shows, talking about art and installing his works, more than 250 in all, in his office and two homes (he also has an apartment in Miami).

"Every day when I come home, I certainly look at the work I have and inevitably — this is the truth! — see something I hadn't seen before: a nuance or light reflected on the piece. The art on the wall isn't background. I notice it every day," he said.

"He's just crazy about art," said Lisa Gold, executive director of the nonprofit Washington Project for the Arts, an organization with which Ognibene has been involved for more than 20 years. His art mania was on full display recently when they spent time together at Art Basel Miami Beach, one of the biggest art shows in the country: "He wants to see everything and do everything," Gold said. "He has an insane amount of energy and never wants to miss out."

The contemporary collection that Ognibene, 57, has amassed over three decades — he typically snaps up works based on a gut reaction — is eclectic. He owns a large number of figurative paintings and drawings that he describes as intricate. He has an extensive cache of photographs and a small group of abstract pieces and sculptures.

He has started to dip into video art, though in his unassuming style, he said he is "still in kindergarten" when it comes to new media. But as part of his apartment upgrade, he's transforming his guest room into a new-media center.

About six years ago, at a dinner party he hosted, contemporary art collector Mera Rubell told him that she found his art "serene" and challenged him to be more daring. Ognibene considers Rubell a role model — she and her husband started buying art on a limited budget and now have an extraordinary collection. He still decides instantly whether he likes something, but he is perhaps more adventurous in his choices now, he said.

Pieces he selected in order to show a visitor the contours of his collection include a large, color-soaked abstract painting by Maggie Michael — one of the D.C. artists he ardently supports — and two stills from

Kathryn Cornelius's video "Resolve," in which she vacuums sand at a beach. Cornelius also lives in Washington.

In the painting "St. Sebastian," Washington artist Erik Sandberg has rendered the martyr in a classical Renaissance or baroque pose, down to the draped loincloth, halo and mournful sky. But the contemporary twist is his recasting as an older, wrinkled man rather than the young, muscular and often sexualized depictions of the past. A watercolor by New York-based artist Balint Zsako recalls 19th-century anatomical drawings, surrealist fantasy and childhood doodles.

"Little Boy Blue and His Comely Cremello," a disturbing new piece by Baltimore artist Katie Miller, shows a muscular coiffed boy beside a horse with heels, blown-back hair and a taut body suggesting the plastic quality of Barbie dolls and fashion photography. In a photograph by New Yorker Amy Elkins, a shirtless man posing before florid wallpaper stares out with a protective, blank expression that hints at a concealed reservoir of emotion. Washingtonian Patrick McDonough's "Wade Guyton Untitled," an abstract needlepoint quotation of work by Guyton, blends craft and seriousness with contemporary irony.



Baltimore artist Katie Miller's oil painting "Child Standing on a Dresser" is in Ognibene's collection. Because he has lived in the D.C. area for nearly 30 years, half his collection is loyal to local artists. (Katie Miller/Courtesy of Fred Ognibene)

"He buys what he loves, but there's a vision to it," Gold said. "He does his homework, but sometimes he can't help himself. He follows his heart."

Raised near Buffalo, Ognibene doesn't recall whether his parents, a chiropractor and a teacher, ever took him to a museum. In college, he took one art history course.

But after moving to New York City for a medical residency in the late 1970s, he began reading the Village Voice, wandering downtown and exploring galleries. He saw works by Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. He was electrified, if daunted. "It was all new to me," he said. "I soaked it all in."

A few years later, he moved to Washington, where one of his roommates, an art student, introduced him to the art scene. He bought his first work, a small geometric print, in 1984 from the Torpedo Factory in Alexandria.

He never stopped collecting. At times, he has sworn he's going on an art diet, but then he keeps on buying at a clip of — "Oh, God, I'm embarrassed" — one or two pieces a month. He has a vague budget (which he doesn't always follow) and a promise to himself not to spend more than \$10,000 on one work (so far, promise kept). He isn't suffering financially for his art but says he scrimps in some ways — no fancy car, consignment-shop purchases — so he can keep buying. There's no secret stockpile of money. "I only wish!" he said.

"He's not a hedge-fund manager who skims some off the top to support the arts or increase his visibility," said Annie Gawlak, director of G Fine Art in Northeast Washington, a gallery he frequents. "But he continues to be incredibly supportive."

He frequently buys pieces by art students and other young and emerging talent, following them — and often buying multiple works — as their career unfolds. He feels validated when artists he bet on early do well, but he says making money has never been his goal.

He rarely resells work. In addition to three pieces he donated to the Hirshhorn Museum, he has let go of only about 16 works over the decades. Usually, he parts with something because it no longer fits the collection or he needs space. He sells (or gives) to friends when he can; he visits ex-pieces.

"When you're passionate about something, no matter what it is, it's hard to release that passion," he said.

It's that brand of sweetness that has made Ognibene popular with D.C.'s arty set. They also love him because of what Gawlak described as his devotion to "the whole ecological art scene in Washington."

Ognibene was recently appointed chairman of the Washington Project for the Arts board. He religiously shows up at openings and happenings, makes charitable donations, and hosts events for nonprofit groups, galleries and institutions.

He has been enlisted to host an event for (e)merge, a contemporary art fair planned in Washington for later this month. By then, if all goes well, his apartment renovation will be complete and some lucky visitors will be able to see about 50 of his artworks firsthand. (Roughly 20 pieces are installed in his office and his Miami apartment. He keeps the rest at home in an elaborately outfitted closet space and basement storage.)

He has a few things to do first — deciding where the artwork will go, for starters. He'll find permanent spots for some pieces; others will be rotated in. "There's so many I love, it will be hard," he said. Then he'll have to produce new versions of the plastic-encased, gallery-style lists that he leaves in every room, bathroom and hallway so visitors can see who made what and when.

He's also going to have to address his art-storage situation: He's on the verge of running out of space. The solution, he said, is not cutting himself off from buying more art. There's no way.

"It's hard to explain," he said, almost apologetically. "Important things come first: health, family, the well-being of others. But with my more expendable resources, I've chosen to put them toward art."

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