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COLLECTORS

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Complementary Visions

Bruce Barnes *and* **Joe Cunningham** *live with their collection of American Arts and Crafts furniture, Minimalist art and other modern treasures in the Dakota apartment building overlooking New York's Central Park.*

IN 1972, AFTER VISITING THE GREAT American sculptor, Richard Stankiewicz, I had an unforgettable experience. In the 1950s, Stankiewicz, a welder and assembler of detritus – junkyard bits including discarded mufflers, stovepipes and plumbing parts – had a reputation akin to David Smith's. But he could not hack the art world, and in the following decade moved with his family to the rural reaches of western Massachusetts, where, by the time I met him, the sculptures that had been reproduced full-page and full-colour in Life and other mass-market magazines were collecting cobwebs in a former chicken coop. But these pieces so haphazardly stored, and the iron figures standing in the Stankiewiczes' field, still had a staggering vitality. When I left down the dirt driveway, my experience of everything was transformed. Country mailboxes, road signs, TV antennae – all had acquired unprecedented energy.

Three decades later, visiting Bruce Barnes and Joe Cunningham in their vast and elegant Manhattan apartment, I felt a comparable metamorphic experience. This time I was affected by the achievement of collectors – not artists in the traditional sense, but people of such pervasive vision that they are artists none the less. Their collection seemed to animate for me quite ordinary surfaces with a subtle intensity, and to endow generally undramatic forms with a Platonic essentiality.

Sitting at Barnes and Cunningham's Gustav Stickley table – feeling the generous, almost theatrical space between the table and the surrounding walls, a space that functioned like a superbly wide mount around a delicate drawing – I could not help thinking that the five perfect scoops of Cunningham's homemade sorbets were the ultimate minimal sculpture. The form of each scoop seemed the essence of what shape can be – the wonder, in this case, of convexity – and the colours were subtle and splendid, reminders of the marvellousness of hue and tone.

Barnes and Cunningham have selected late nineteenth- and twentieth-century furniture, abstract and minimal art, pottery and decorative objects with such an eye for surface and form, and have installed them with such clarity and balance, that they succeed in altering what and how one sees. This is hardly the norm for collectors. Most of the great amassers of our epoch throw together their holdings like blue-chip stock portfolios, trying to impress with name and financial value, and taking few risks. Barnes and Cunningham are rarities: aesthetes of the best sort, aficionados, individuals of passion and

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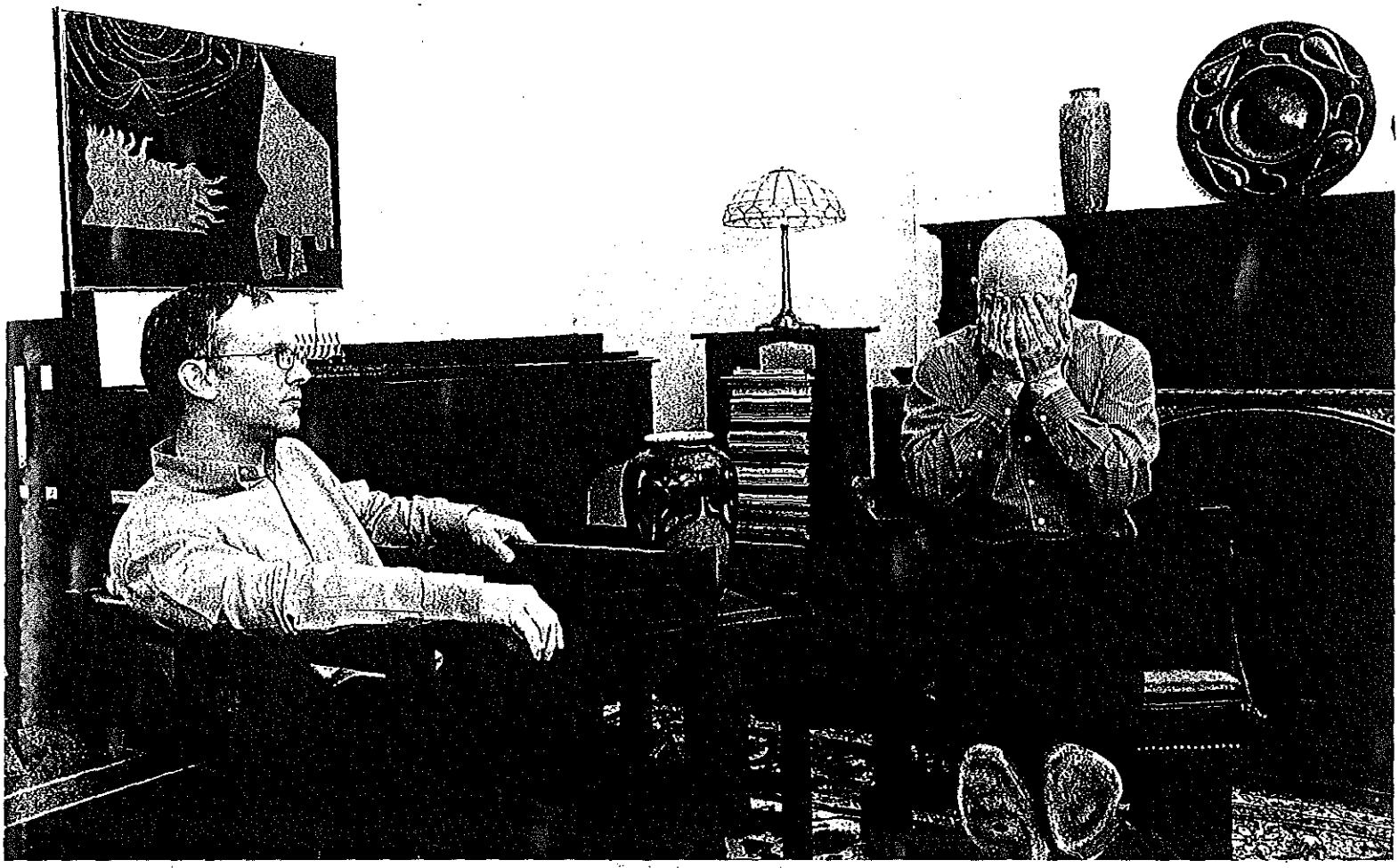

Bruce Barnes (left) on a Harvey Ellis-designed Gustave Stickly chair (1903) and Joseph Cunningham (right) on a Purcell and Elmslie chair (1912). A Newcombe College Pottery vase by Leona Nicholson known as 'The Oak Tree Pot' (1902) is on the table between them; behind Bruce Barnes is William Baziotes's *Phantom* (1953). Photo: Paul T Owen

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They have been together now for four and a half years. When they met they had very different interests and financial capabilities, though similar dedication and intensity. In 1991, when the seventeen-year-old Joe Cunningham was a high school student in Madison, Wisconsin, he read in The New Art Examiner that John Cage had done a series of drawings for which Crown Point Press had made and smoked the paper. Already obsessed with process and materials, admiring 'both the drawn and the watery elements', Cunningham scraped together the funds for the lovely ethereal piece he still keeps among the treasures his now more luxurious life permits. He subsequently acquired prints by Ellsworth Kelly and a Gerhard Richter oil drawing, always paying fullest attention to every detail of medium and technique, as well as to the complete history of the piece. After he and Barnes met, their first mutual purchase was five Richard Tuttle prints, Perceived Obstacles. Recalling the entry of these pieces into their communal existence, Barnes declares, with a radiant smile, 'I've never seen anybody so happy'.

Cunningham, who has recently received his doctorate in philosophy and is the author of a long and insightful essay on Agnes Martin, is planning what he hopes will be a major American museum devoted to the decorative arts. When he first met Barnes, he was a mathematician. And Barnes was a games theorist with a PhD in economics who had gone to Wall Street in 1986 and done well. In 1989 he had made his first art acquisition, a painting of a rooster by Salina Trieff, 'an artist I generally can't stand'. This, too, is still part of their collection. 'It had a certain attitude or whimsy.' It is, beyond that, very well-painted, and quintessentially cockerel.

Barnes went on to become a major collector of American Arts and Crafts furniture. 'What I like is the material – beautiful wood – and the lines are generally simple. There's some modernity to it, but also craftsmanship. It's cosy. I never thought of it as being bungalow-oriented, or for a country house.' Starting in the early 1990s, he began to amass pieces of Gustav Stickley furniture, always keeping meticulous track of the pedigree of each object. Before he met Joe Cunningham, he did not enjoy these mas-

terpieces of the genre as he now does – nor did he live with them in the spacious luxury of their current setting – but he assembled them systematically. Cathers and Dembrosky, the ultimate dealers in the field, wanted him to buy a very costly Stickley cupboard; he said he would do so only if they agreed that from that point forward he would be offered every important piece ahead of any other potential purchaser. Without a hint of ostentation, Barnes frankly admits to having spent millions of dollars a year.

After they met in 1997, Barnes walked Cunningham by Cathers and Dembrosky's shop. Cunningham recalls, 'I didn't know he collected. Looking in the window, he asked me, "Do you know what it is?" "Yes, it's Prairie furniture", I replied. I'm from Wisconsin. Frank Lloyd Wright did it. He's the best, and that's it. I gravitated towards Mies Van der Rohe, the Bauhaus, Le Corbusier. I pictured myself with a white apartment, austere, Mies, and a Pollock, etc.' This would all change soon enough – and he would learn far more about what was really in that window.

Barnes adds, 'I introduced him to it. He had no taste for it before. And I had no particular taste for Minimalist art. I wasn't against it, but had no feeling.' And Cunningham counteracts, 'But now, in the face of a great Ryman, you could weep.'

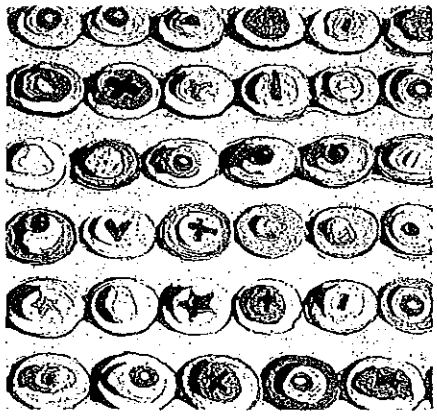
'There was', Barnes sagely concludes, 'a confluence.' That is more than apparent in room after airy room, where, under high ceilings and with windows of ample scale, the Arts and Crafts furniture, the Minimalist art, and, at astounding moments, a modern masterpiece – an early Picasso oil, a Cézanne Bather – exist in one subtle, stunning juxtaposition after another, and yield surprise on surprise.

'We give each other very good advice. We have come to a degree of savvy in each other's area of collection', Cunningham explains. Barnes adds, 'Joe has a level of scholarship and connoisseurship that I never had. He's much better read than I am. He's the one who reads the auction catalogues first, and marks them up, and then I agree.'

'We have been exceedingly consistent in our view of things', Cunningham adds, guiding me through the collection that includes everything from that John Cage watercolour to a rivetting Josef Albers print from 1939 (Beta, an image held by several museum collections but of which this is possibly the only example in private hands), a Frederick H Rhead pot from 1913, three oils on paper by the little known contemporary artist Elena del Revero, and superb drawings by Kate Shephard, a somewhat Minimalist contemporary who is one of Barnes and Cunningham's favourites. One of the many surprises is an intricate 1953 abstraction by Baziotes. When you look at the work with them, they can tell you everything about what Baziotes was doing at the time, his work before and after, and the artist's standing and critical acclaim during his life and since. The information lends perspective to the experience of viewing, but the greatest aid is the setting. This pristine environment – warm and recessive at the same time, dignified but by no means sterile – enables you to see the angles, lines and colours of the Baziotes in a way that would never be possible in a museum or gallery.

This work exudes a quiet excitement. It is an outstanding example from the artist's strongest period – 'He's someone where you need an important piece if you're going to have one', Cunningham explains. 'There's a wonderful depth in the surface', Barnes observes. Underneath the painting, a Christopher Dresser silver toast rack stands on the grand piano like a sublime piece of sculpture. Barnes explains that it is dated 1877, and comments with understatement, 'He was so ahead of his time'. Cunningham immediately adds, 'He is of monumental importance', and brings forward a jug by Dresser that is equally extraordinary.

And there are incredible Stickley tables that redefine one's notion of Arts and Crafts furniture. There are rare pots from the Marblehead and van Briggle potteries. Then a plethora of furniture by the little known Charles



Wayne Thiebaud, *Cracker Rows*, 1963, oil on canvas, 35.6 x 38.1 cm

Rohlfs, whose work is almost as complex and inventive as that of Antonio Gaudi. Barnes explains that Rohlfs was, in fact, a contemporary of Gaudi's. He was also a former Shakespearian actor whose future wife's father had said she could not marry an actor – and so he became a furniture maker. Quite matter-of-factly, Barnes notes, 'We are clearly the world's foremost collectors of Charles Rohlfs'. He opens several of the small drawers in a remarkable Rohlfs desk, pointing out the notchwork and reticulation. And to this visitor's eye, the collectors' juxtaposition of this complex piece of wooden furniture with a Jill Barof painting made of wet and dropped paper suggest an originality that is art in its own right.

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Rohlfs and Stickley are not the only designers collected here in unusual depth. Many of the rooms have remarkable lighting fixtures by the California-based architects Greene and Greene. Once again Barnes's claim that 'We have the leading collection of Greene and Greene lighting' is no exaggeration.

An 1899 Frank Lloyd Wright chair – 'in my mind one of the great works of sculpture', the Wisconsin-born Cunningham says – sits near to Wright's better-known 1902 Ward Willets chair. The comparison is instructive. Barnes and Cunningham covered the earlier piece with an Anni Albers upholstery fabric, recently made by Maharam, that replicates the sound-absorbing, light-reflecting material with which Albers won her Bauhaus diploma. This is the sort of pairing you will see nowhere else. Barnes points out that at first Cunningham did not take risks in his collecting, but risks are a large part of what their vision is now all about.

A few steps away is the 1901 Picasso Conversation, small, rich and intense. Barnes delights in taking it off the wall and showing viewers the back of the cradled panel. As for the painting itself: the woman's gown, close up, resembles a Jackson Pollock, while the faces and impasto elsewhere recall Daumier.

The Cézanne Bather like the Picasso, is hung in a corridor, a casual situation that gives the work intimacy and immediacy, making it a part of life rather than a conspicuous treasure. 'There were four such studies', Barnes says. 'The first two were not forward-looking enough. This is the third. The fourth, which belongs to Jasper Johns, is spectacular.' He and Cunningham then proceed to compare their painting with every other Cézanne Bather, not pedantically but with an enthusiasm that comes from looking at, and really knowing, cherishing, the painting.

But now that Barnes has encouraged Cunningham to look at works by lesser known, contemporary artists, you never know what you will find where. In the dining-room there is a fascinating ink transfer work by Stefana McClure, essentially composed of removed Japanese subtitles. A piece by Wes Mills, an artist who works in Montana, made by rubbing graphite on painted canvas ('He's about all these fussy processes', Barnes explains), exemplifies the collectors' attention to surfaces and process, which again heightens that awareness in the viewer. A burned paper piece by Davide Cantoni, who uses an iron to singe the surface, and a work by John Andrews, who uses encaustic to layer pigment into wax, make us contemplate process still further.

Part of the bravery of this collection, its hallmark independence, is that these little known artists hang quite democratically in the company of big names. Here's a 1963 Wayne Thiebaud of canapés that would please almost any museum curator of contemporary art – it has a crystalline delicacy not always found in Thiebaud's work. Nearby are many prints by Louise Halpin Wiesenfarth, a printmaker Cunningham discovered because he taught her son piano. 'They are about the art of printmaking', Cunningham observes, to which Barnes adds, 'We both love craft and process, in so many forms, but craft in the service of art'. HF

Clockwise from upper left: John Cage's *Without Horizon No. 8*, a sculpture by recent Bard College graduate Seong Chun, and a plant stand by Charles Rohlfs (1903). Photo: Paul T Owen