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"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

**Dennis Scholl is in his studio after buying over  
two thousand works of art**



*Installation view, Dennis Scholl*

**By ANTHONY HADEN-GUEST** April 12, 2025

Those who write about or otherwise anatomise the artworld look at artists, dealers, curators but, except when confronted with such attention-grabbers as Peggy Guggenheim or Bob and Ethel Scull, seldom pay much attention to collectors. At best they treat them as a plus, a crucial element in the art economy, at worst, as with Robert Rauschenberg's inflamed encounter with Bob Scull at a 1973 Sotheby's auction after the taxicab magnate had sold a painting for \$85,000 that he had bought fifteen years before for \$900, they diss them as artful speculators.

Collectors though are a powerful artworld presence, who often share behaviors, such as loyalty to their artists, and who may sometimes themselves become part of the art-making process. Which is very much the case with Dennis Scholl, who is now turning pieces from his substantial collection quite literally into his own art.

For Scholl the collecting had begun early. “My first collection was when I was five years old,” he told me. His target had been the cardboard bottle caps on the morning milk bottle, when each carried the portrait of a US president. The milkman had dropped off a list. “I got 34 of the 35 presidents,” Scholl says. “I taped that list over my bed and every night just before I went to sleep I would go I’ve got to get Millard Fillmore! I’ve got to get Millard Fillmore! And then I did. “And that to me is such a satisfaction, organizing and completing something like that. So I went from there to stamps right away.” From stamps he moved on to coins. “You can sift through change and find coins that were thirty or forty or fifty years old.”



*Installation view, Dennis Scholl*

Fast forward. Scholl grew up on Miami Beach and prospered as an entrepreneur but remained as obsessively drawn to the art experience as ever. “About fifteen years ago I decided that I wanted to have a creative practice,” he said. So for five years he made documentary films about art and artists on subjects who included Clyfford Still, Theaster Gates and Ai WeiWei. “I caught Ai WeiWei when he was speaking in Aspen,

Colorado,” Scholl said. “He talked to me. It was pretty joyful actually.” These won him twenty-three regional Emmys.

Scholl and his wife, Debra, were meanwhile building an art collection. Indeed several collections. Prints were the starter . “We built up a collection of about six hundred pieces,” he said. ”Then we went to photography and built a collection of a similar number. After that we started collecting all sorts of conceptual work, including Olafur Eliasson and Sylvie Fleury. And subsequently a collection of Aboriginal Australian contemporary art.” Ever the manic collector, but here with no core concept, Scholl was also picking up potent ephemera that caught his eye, such as photographs, newspapers, magazines.

Scholl made a further move about ten years ago. “I’ve bought over two thousand works of art in my life,” he said. “I decided I wanted to have a studio art practice so I could just be in the studio and obsess over work by myself”. His art making began. “I did that for about five years and I just wasn’t getting anywhere,” he says. “Being in the artworld for so long I knew that what I was making wasn’t really up to snuff.”

Scholl chucked his entire oeuvre away. “So I felt what is it can I do? What is it I can say? Initially I took my collector’s gene, my collector’s experience, and transposed it into an artmaking practice,” he said. “I wasn’t a trained painter or sculptor. But I *am* a trained gatherer of artifacts. I’ve been doing it for decades and decades. It felt like something I could do and could do at a level that was reasonably significant.”

So Scholl decided to make his own work by organizing pieces of his collected material into hangs that would deliver strong art messaging. The actual form of the hang was in his head from the get go, it would be a twelve-sided circular figure: A dodecagon. Why that? “The dodecagon to me represents the passage of time,” he said. “A clock, a calendar, the zodiac. And in ancient history many buildings were made in that shape for spiritual reasons, you see a lot of twelve-sided buildings.”

This format endows the work with a specific look and Scholl gives two reasons for working with symmetry and repetition. “The first is that I find them very soothing, very comfortable. The second reason is when you’re making work, you try to make work

which is quintessentially yours,” he says. “And I want the symmetry to draw you into the piece, to get closer and closer and closer. And then you see that it’s not an abstraction. You are asked to participate in the work by reading something or looking at a series of overlapping photographs or historical memorabilia. So I get the aesthetic pleasure of making work that’s symmetrical and repetitive. And then I get the opportunity to draw people in, to learn about the back story of the work.”

The back stories, yes. “I asked myself, well, what are you going to say?” Scholl says. “What is the question you are going to ask?” No problem. That emerged from the nature of the collection, the embedded memories. “I’m asking the question: What is your most vivid collective memory? A collective memory isn’t when your father gave you a bicycle, you don’t share that. A collective memory is something we all share. It’s when you remember exactly where you were, exactly what you were doing. And that is when everything started to fall into place and I began to make these works.”

So Scholl’s pieces are built around collective memories which seemed to demand inclusion, like the assassination of JFK and the Arab terrorists at the Munich Olympics in 1972. “These are the things that resonated with me,” he said. “The loss of the Israeli athletes and coaches in 1972 Munich. It was 27 years after the war and Germany was on the world stage again. And then the terrorists come. I want things that resonate with other people too. A lot of other people. I have a piece about Michael Jackson in the show. With his glove. A lot of people relate to that.”

Where does he get his materials?

“Primarily through auctions,” he says. “I look at around 30,000 items a month. And I wind up selecting a potential dozen or so. And then I have to bid on them. And I wind up getting one or two a month. And that’s how the source material comes to the practice.”|

How does he make his choices. Why, for instance, the Munich Olympics and not Princess Diana?

“I might do a Princess Di too actually” Dennis Scholl said. “I’ve been collecting a few things but it hasn’t come together yet. I’m working now on a piece about the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. I’ve been gathering material. That will be in one of the upcoming shows.” **WM**



## ANTHONY HADEN-GUEST

Anthony Haden-Guest (born 2 February 1937) is a British writer, reporter, cartoonist, art critic, poet, and socialite who lives in New York City and London. He is a frequent contributor to major magazines and has had several books published including *TRUE COLORS: The Real Life of the Art World* and *The Last Party, Studio 54, Disco and the Culture of the Night*.

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