



Las Vegas designer Lee Cagley will loan a few works to the show from his private collection.

The Las Vegas Art Museum's summer exhibit is more than a collection of beautiful works—it's a display of the city's new collecting muscle.

# A SHOW of POWER

BY WILLIAM L. FOX

**It's a well-trod truism that people collect art for many reasons,** with passion and appreciation for both works of art and artists among them. When people band together to form public collections, however, citizens and cities have one motivation in common: to establish status among their peers. That was true for Florence and the de' Medicis in the 1400s, and it is true for Las Vegas and the resort barons today.

Humans are naturally acquisitive, a hardwired trait that allows us to display our acumen and physical prowess to peers, potential mates and rivals. The oldest collection of aesthetic objects identified so far is African ochre mined 1.7 million years ago by our hominid ancestors. Offhand, I can't think of any civilization that hasn't left behind aesthetic objects as evidence of collecting.

The rulers of city-states in Mesopotamia and India assembled great artistic, botanical and zoological collections, a practice the ancient Egyptians adopted. Greece plundered Egypt for its own collections, then Rome ransacked Greece. Italy, France and England raided classical antiquities everywhere. Greece and Italy then turned the tables by suing the Getty and the Metropolitan in the United States for objects they wish to restore or add to their collections. Not just to have marble statues or golden bowls back in their respective countries; no, it's to fold them into their national collections. It's the collection that's important to a government, not just the object.

All this has bearing on why the decision of the Las Vegas Art Museum to mount *Las Vegas Collects Contemporary* at this particular moment is an important one.

## OUR COLLECTION OF COLLECTORS

Most art museums regularly show off selected items from their locally prominent collectors, many of whom, quite logically, sit on their boards. I won't go into the arcane contemporary algorithms that describe the financial benefits to both parties when doing so, but in essence, think ochre, prestige, a tax write-off—and, to be sure, the genuine passion and connoisseurship of both collectors and curators. It's only *primarily* about money and power. Sometimes it's as indirect as a collector taking the time to learn about Quattrocento painting in Florence, a way of saying, *Look how I can afford to spend my time.*

Las Vegas collectors have had a few of their pieces trotted out for public viewing before, and Steve Wynn made perfectly transparent the relevant motives and mechanisms when, in the late '90s, he persuaded the Nevada Legislature to allow him to turn his private collection into a tax-exempt revenue-generating part of his resorts.

What's changed in Las Vegas is that Wynn is no longer the only collector of note. Actually, he never was. Before Wynn, to give one example, was Roger Thomas, who in the 1980s built the first major corporate art collection in the state for what is now called the Bank of America Nevada Fine Art Collection. There's a reason Wynn put Thomas in charge of the interiors of his resorts, and it's based both on Thomas' aesthetic acumen and his ability to assemble—to collect—art and artifacts for the facilities. That's a skill he honed, in part, through building the bank collection.

Robin and Danny Greenspun were collecting at the same time, concentrating on amassing select pieces by significant regional and Nevada artists. And there was designer Lee Cagley, who broadened that sensibility in assembling a formidable contemporary collection for the Rio, before the resort was bought up by Harrah's. Like Thomas, he had his own private collection—and kept collecting.

All of these people have a genuine passion for art and, perhaps more importantly, a high regard for artists. They would collect paintings and prints and photographs and sculptures regardless of tax breaks or the social perks such endeavors provide. And that is also true to some degree for Wynn, who has had nearly a lifelong interest in art.

This small core of collectors began to expand and wield its influence in the late '90s, beginning with the opening of the Wynn collection at Bellagio. This move encouraged Thomas Krens to bring the Guggenheim franchise to town. PaceWildenstein, the venerable gallery from Chelsea, and an outfit from which Las Vegas collectors had been buying for years, took over when Wynn sold Bellagio and opened his next resort and gallery. PaceWildenstein has moved on, but the Bellagio Gallery is now controlled locally and has its sights set on growing a more local audience (see Page 42).



Meantime, the biggest new player in town is, in fact, one of the world's top collectors of contemporary art, Glenn Schaeffer. Several years ago while at the helm of Mandalay Resorts, he hired Michelle Quinn to furnish artwork for THEhotel, whose collection includes standouts such as the British artist Richard Long. Schaeffer's new Vegas venture, the Fontainebleau resort, will showcase a variety of impressive works from such artists as James Turrell and Chinese superstar Ai Weiwei.

And then came Jim Murren, MGM Mirage's CFO who arrived from equity banking on Wall Street—an executive with an art history

degree who's underwriting the creation of the \$40 million contemporary collection to be mounted within CityCenter. A few years ago he hired Quinn to curate the major art collection (featuring works by Ellsworth Kelly and Uta Barth) at the Nevada Cancer Institute that he founded. Now he's placed her in charge of the CityCenter art program, and the ensemble she is casting is stellar—Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, Frank Stella, Maya Lin, Henry Moore, Nancy Rubins and more.

It's apparently become de rigueur for casino owners to own serious art. For example, Frank and Lorenzo Fertitta of Station Casinos and Ultimate



Paintings from *Las Vegas Collects Contemporary* include (clockwise from left): Zhang Xiaogang's "My Daughter," John Wesley's "QE2" and Mary Heilman's "Rosebud."

Fighting Championship fame own a substantial collection, featuring works by Damien Hirst, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol.

### A POWERFUL SOCIAL SYNERGY

Libby Lumpkin, director of the Las Vegas Art Museum, gets a somewhat faraway look in her eyes when she talks about this level of collectors in town, many of whom are now on the museum board and whose works are in the show. She is not oblivious to the fact that hedge-fund managers are one of the handful of reasons that auctions at Sothebys continue to break sales records for contemporary art even as the mortgage loan industry crashes on a distant

shore. Collecting art has become important on Wall Street because it enhances social standing, can make for lucrative investing and is also perceived as a competitive sport. This is the peer group of Murren and Schaeffer, among other new collectors in town.

Furthermore, the resort corporations in Las Vegas operate in a world where the tourist centers in Asia and the Middle East are potential bases for expansion. Think about Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, where MGM Grand announced last year it was building a \$3 billion non-gaming resort. And where Frank Gehry is designing a new museum, the largest Guggenheim in the world. Art is a fungible instrument in an

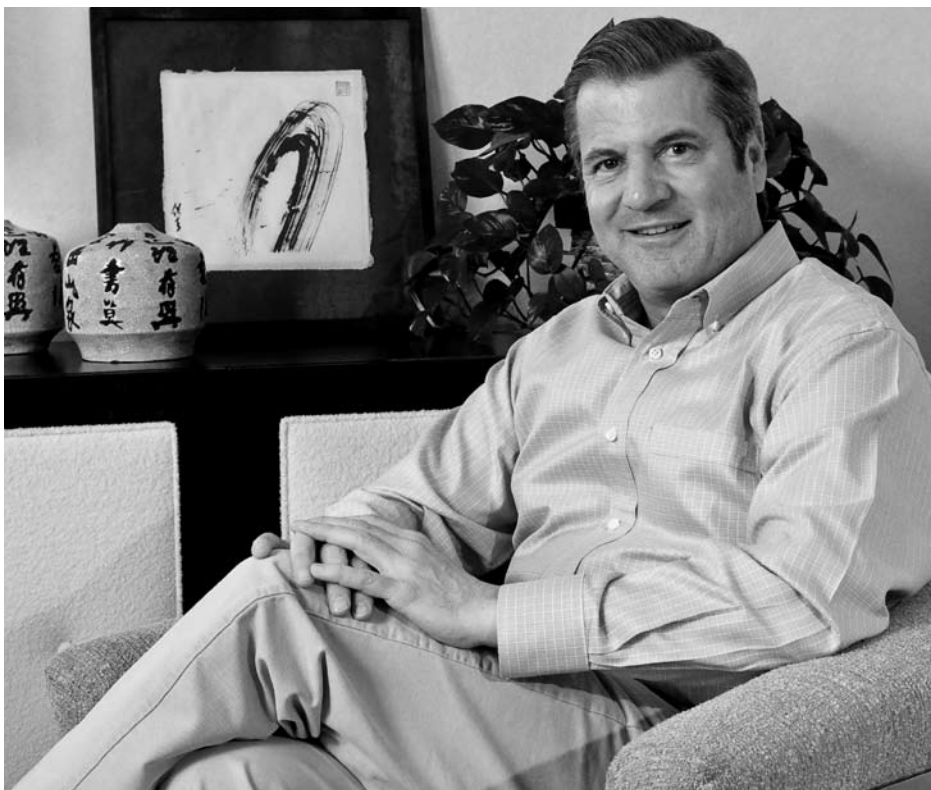
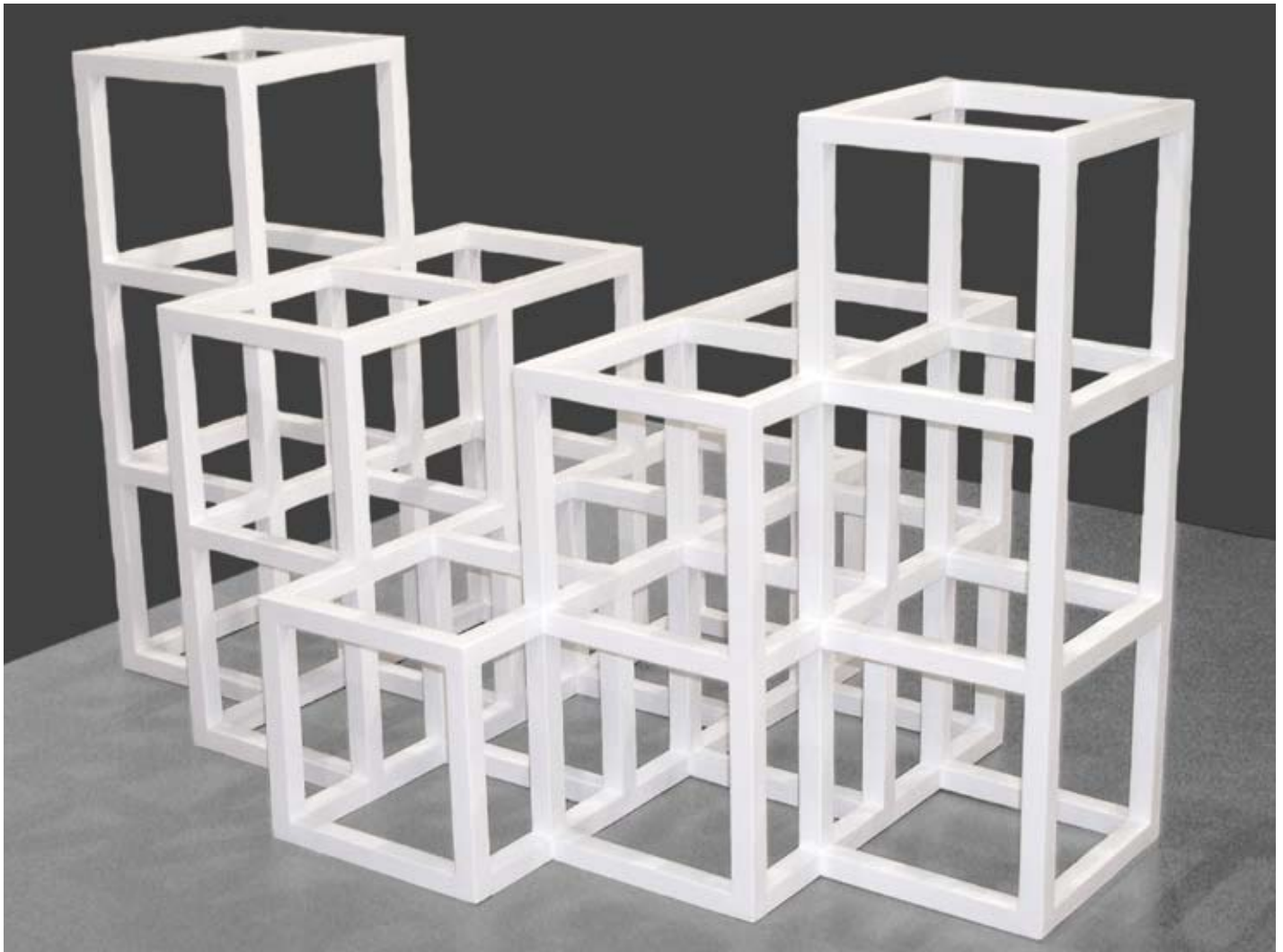
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international environment where many of the players don't care what particular painting is on the wall, just that it confers status at the highest level—and that it thus attracts business.

So the number of serious, high-end collectors in Las Vegas has more than doubled, with the 10 of them in the exhibition spending increasingly large sums of money on art. What they're buying is contemporary, given that Old Masters and Impressionist works are mostly in the hands of museums. That means they are bumping into each other, as Lumpkin points out, at the same galleries and auctions in New York and London. A powerful social synergy is thereby creating itself in Las Vegas, partly from the dynamics of the most powerful collecting scenes in the world. Heady stuff.

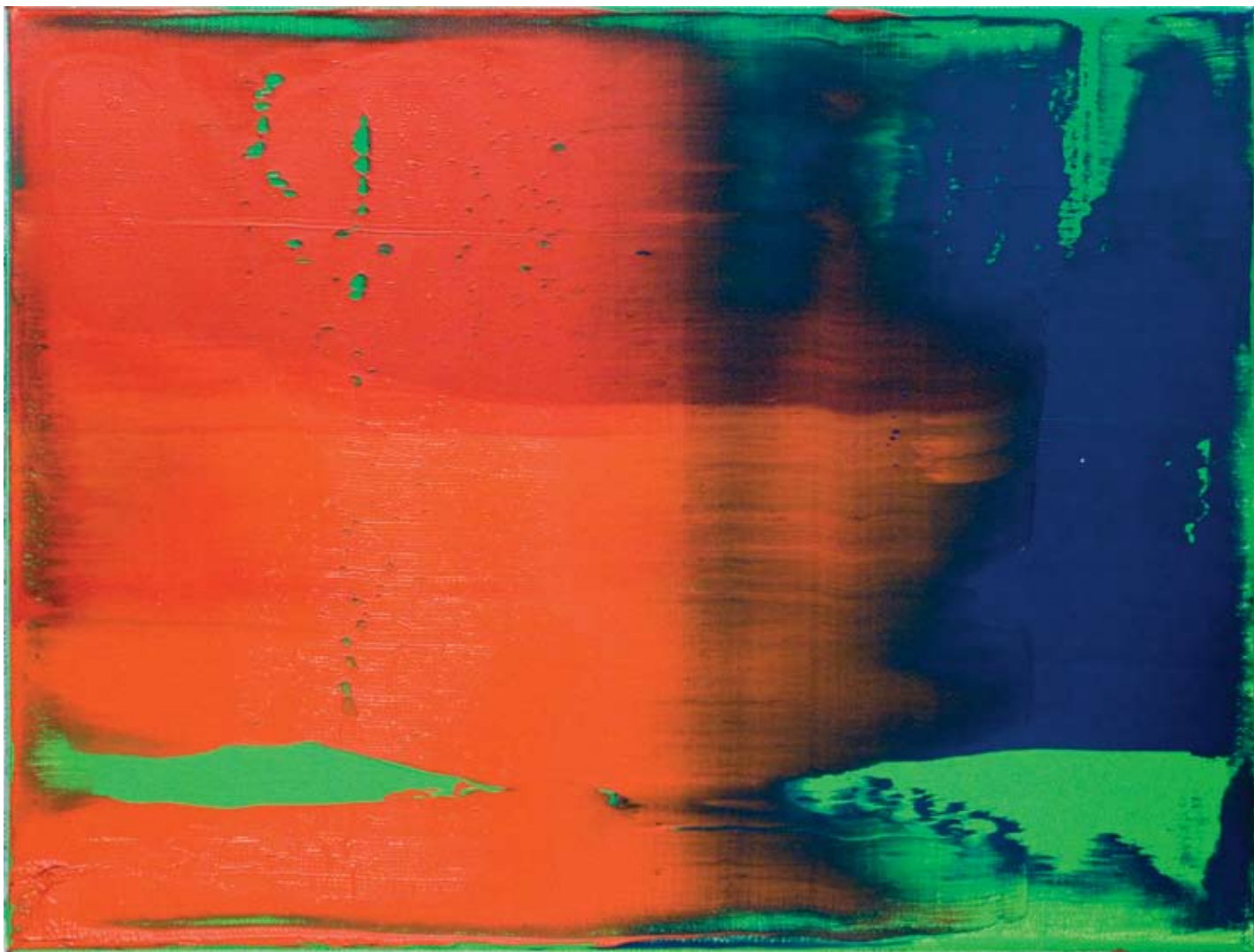
Now, Lumpkin, a Ph.D. in art history who used to manage Wynn's collection at Bellagio, is one of the brighter and more visionary curators in the country. Lured back to Las Vegas with the backing of Schaeffer a few years ago, she accepted the directorship of the art museum, where she promptly upgraded its security and staff, thus making it more feasible for other museums, galleries and artists to loan valuable works of art. (She hopes to eventually move into new building where better climate control would increase those prospects.) It also means she can now host shows of important art bought by local collectors. And, more importantly, she can accept donations from those collectors. Her ambition is to lift the institution into the international level of art tourism destinations such as Bilbao, London and Abu Dhabi. The roster of names represented in *Las Vegas Collects Contemporary* will be familiar to museum-goers in those cities—Hirst, Basquiat, Turrell, along with John Baldessari, Mary Heilman, Ed Ruscha.

The quality of the LVAM collection will determine how much leverage its director will have to borrow works from other institutions of note, whether it's the Museum of Contemporary



Fontainebleau boss Glenn Schaeffer (left) is one of the world's most influential collectors of contemporary art. Works featured in the *Las Vegas Collects Contemporary* exhibit will include (clockwise from top) Sol LeWitt's sculpture "Cube Structure Based on Five Modules," an untitled painting by Gerhard Richter, and James Casebere's photograph "Siena (Vertical)."

ARTWORK COURTESY OF LAS VEGAS ART MUSEUM; GLENN SCHAEFFER: CHRISTOPHER SMITH



Art in Los Angeles or the Tate in London. After all, the loan is given in expectation of a return favor. And yes, it all potentially benefits the value of the local individual collections, hence increasing tax write-downs. Not to mention deepening the shadow cast by certain Las Vegas chieftains on the world stage. And did I mention that Steve Wynn is now collecting contemporary art?

Lumpkin's strategy is ambitious, audacious and a pitch-perfect match for the future of Las Vegas. It also may have an interesting long-range implication for the city as well. Another museum may well be needed, one that collects, preserves and interprets local and regional art for Las Vegas, not for international art tourists.

Just as various reasons compel people to collect art, so citizens and cities commission great architecture with multiple agendas in mind, but once again, what those agents have in common is a demonstration of the sophistication that money and power can obtain, and Las Vegas is no exception. In that light it makes perfect sense that the LVAM, now operating out of the Sahara West Library, has opted out of remodeling the All-American SportPark for its new home in favor of

finding either a more distinguished building or erecting one of its own. We can hope that it's the latter, as Lumpkin and her board of directors are smart and urbane enough to commission a design that would once again raise the city's profile in the design world.

CityCenter added Norman Foster, Rafael Viñoly and Daniel Libeskind to the civic collection of architects, which already includes Frank Gehry, Rem Koolhaas, Jon Jerde, Antoine Predock and Michael Graves. That's an amazing roster given the relatively modest size of the city and the speed with which it was assembled, but much remains to be done if Las Vegas is going to keep pace with Dubai. And just as the names from out of town in an art collection create the necessity for a more localized institution, so the visiting architects raise opportunities for the Las Vegas-based designers.

You can argue that the construction techniques and civic attitude that allowed the Las Vegas Strip to turn itself inside out once a decade helped make it possible for the Asians and Middle Easterners to create their own new cities based on entertainment and retailing.

## LAS VEGAS COLLECTS CONTEMPORARY

**Where:** Las Vegas Art Museum, 9600 W. Sahara Ave.

**Opening:** 5 p.m. May 22.

**Exhibition:** May 23 to Nov. 30.

**Details:** 360-8000, [lvam.org](http://lvam.org).

The collecting of art and architecture has been subsumed into supporting roles. There's nothing new or bad about the practice, but it's useful to acknowledge the layers involved. And it's not such a bad thing for Las Vegas to be compared to Florence. **DC**

*William L. Fox is a Los Angeles-based writer who has published 10 books on art, architecture and landscape, including In the Desert of Desire: Las Vegas and the Culture of Spectacle. He is currently the first overseas visiting fellow to be hosted by the National Museum of Australia in Canberra.*