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"The Collector"
By Gerard Brown

You can't buy just one – or at least that's what local artists and dealers are hoping.

If you asked Philadelphia's artists and dealers for a wish list, the first thing on it would likely be a raft of collectors. Audience is good, but attendance doesn't pay artists' or dealers' bills. In the art world, collecting is almost a virtue in and of itself. It plays an important part in art history, both on the consumer and the creative sides of the fence. Access to collections through museums has been an essential element of art education for centuries, and Surrealism made collecting into a creative act. Collecting is crucial.

But in a tight market, don't artists just need customers, plain and simple? Not quite. As badly as they need people to buy art, Philadelphia artists need collectors more because collectors don't stop at having something perfect over the mantelpiece. They have *ideas* about art and collect to give those ideas substance. The question, then, becomes, What can be done to build a market like that?

The area's latest creative answer comes from the Philadelphia Print Collaborative, which (as part of its citywide prints and printmaking bonanza) has commissioned seven Philadelphia artists to make prints in a variety of media. The resulting portfolio, including emerging and established artists' works, is a real treasure, and – if all goes well – will be the first of many future portfolios. Its announced intention (okay, among its announced intentions; this is the kind of win-win idea we could use more of) is to cultivate new print collectors.

The seven artists in the portfolio are not usually associated with printmaking. Working with master printers, they created works using etching, silk screen, offset lithography and other processes. The finished portfolio ranges from Astrid Bowlby's process-oriented work to Jim Houser's graphic agitprop-esque screen print to an image by Judith Schaechter in her harrowing signature style. Works by prominent Philly artists Bruce Pollock, Virgil Marti, James Dupree and Willie Stokes can also be found in the set, which offers us a valuable chance to see familiar artists working in new ways.

As happy as I am for the artists whose work is in this portfolio and about the idea that it will be available through the more affordable media of printmaking, I'm a little suspicious of any attempt to foster collecting by manipulating the laws of supply and demand. Economics 101 teaches us that demand is a function of the how much capital is in the marketplace for any given commodity at any given time. But artwork participates in two markets simultaneously – one of dollars and cents and another of values and ideas.

There is, relative to other consumer goods, not a lot of money floating around to purchase art, and no amount of price-fixing is likely to make people suddenly feel their disposable income is sufficient to enter the art market. A savvy mix of familiar names and up-and-comers may signal a good investment ... or it may not.

First and foremost, artwork returns value on pleasure, not dollars. It is the dividend that will draw people to invest in art. Fortunately, one can cast no stones about the importance of this portfolio as a document of the Philadelphia art community at this particular moment in time. But is that a good reason for new collectors to get into the market? Maybe not.

Unfortunately, there is no common currency between the twin economies in which artworks live, and value in one market is not necessarily a guarantee of value in another. Nonetheless, we see auctions, fundraisers and portfolios marketed principally on their "affordability" rather than the quality of the art they offer. This is akin to opening an art dollar store, where you're certain to be able to afford everything – and

you might even find something you like. But shopping isn't collecting, which involves making decisions about which artwork best suits your ideas and tastes. Collecting is a building process.

If collecting is the sport of investors, people who do not see themselves as investors will not collect. Significant collections have been built on the pensions of postal workers or by barter, so money is not the real obstacle. When collections are available in kits – as they are in portfolios – are we really helping develop collectors' taste, or are we making entry-level products for an undeveloped market?

Because the art world is a neighborhood of the real world and, as such, a place where money talks, collectors will always have power in the making and marketing of art. The Philadelphia Print Collaborative has assembled a portfolio of genuine value to Philadelphia. Let's hope that Philadelphians know a good idea when they see it.

<http://www.philadelphiaweekly.com/view.php?id=872&highlight=collector>