

# FIGURATIVE FOCUS

THE CONTEMPORARY ART  
COLLECTION OF STEVEN BENNETT  
AND DR. ELAINE MELOTTI SCHMIDT  
SPOTLIGHTS PAINTINGS OF WOMEN  
BY WOMEN ARTISTS.

BY JOHN O'HERN  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANCIS SMITH



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“Art finds its form in many ways,” Steven Bennett says as I admire an extraordinary cut crystal punch bowl on his dining room table. It’s an unlikely object in a contemporary house with contemporary paintings. His wife, Dr. Elaine Melotti Schmidt, explains, “It was a 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary present in 1914 to my great-grandparents, Harry and Johanna Ahrend, from their evening bowling league in Brooklyn, New York.” Its history adds to its own inherent beauty.

Bennett shares the stories behind their collection of paintings of women by women artists and how the

collection got its focus.

“I first started thinking about collecting art 10 to 12 years ago,” he says. “The art world was so vast that I knew that to really do it well it would be better to have more depth and less breadth, especially with limited resources. As I started to see what was happening, I saw more work by women artists and women painting women. Women see differently and they see themselves differently.

“As I began to conceptualize a collection I began to focus on women portraying themselves,” he continues. “What they were doing was different from the work of

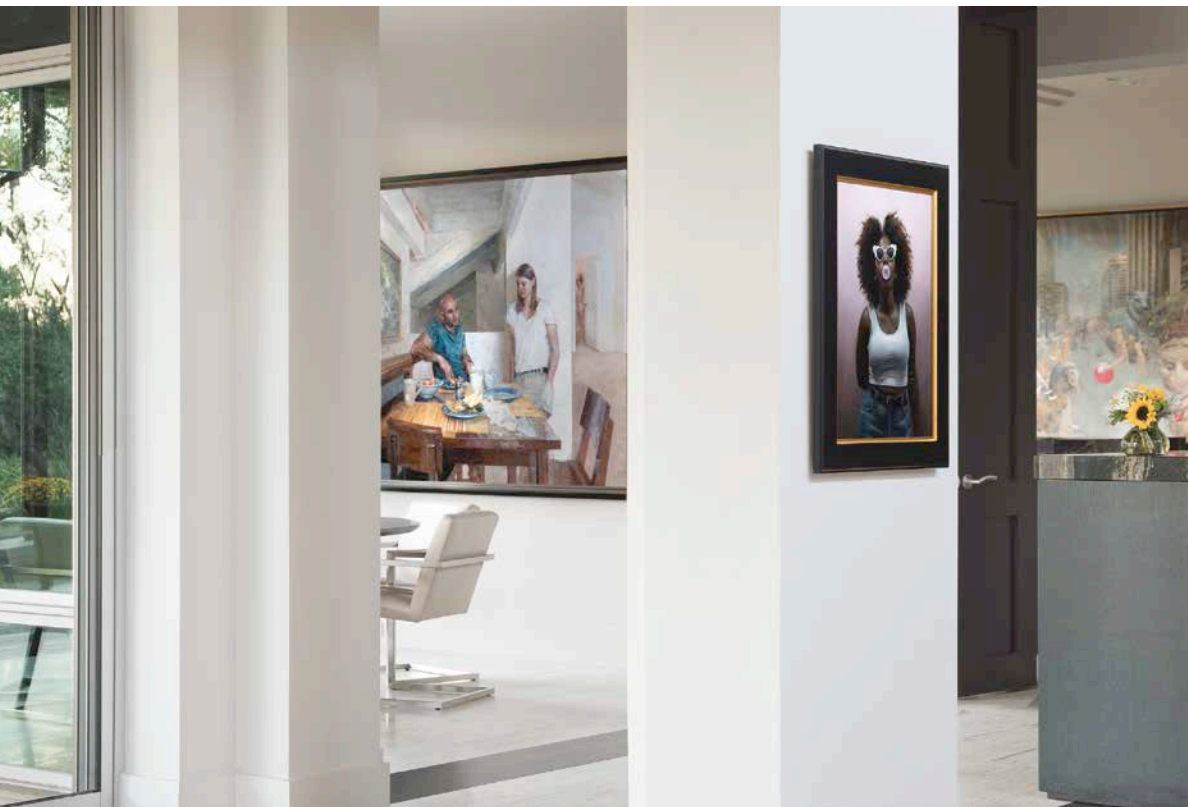
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The home of Steven Bennett and Dr. Elaine Melotti Schmidt.

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Hanging above the fireplace is Andrea Kowch's *The Courtiers*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, which was featured in *American Art Collector's* July 2016 issue.





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men. I decided to limit the collection to figurative realism, a field that was pretty much unoccupied by collectors.”

He found that everybody he collects knows everybody else. “It’s fair to say that women artists are more supportive of one another professionally than men are,” he observes. “After I bought one of Mia Bergeron’s birthday portraits (she does one every year), I heard that her friends were congratulating her at the gallery.

“Acquiring a work changes the collection and being in a collection frequently changes the artist’s attitude,” he continues. “To be collected in some formal sense carries the potential for an artist to approach her work differently. I photograph a new acquisition in situ and send the photo to the artist with a thank you note. An artist ought to see the work as it lives and breathes in its new home. It’s like raising your children and sending them into the world and never seeing them again. I exchange emails and talk to the artists on the phone. When it’s obvious that a collector values an artist’s work it can cause her to value her work differently. Frequently, it results in propelling her work to the next level.

“We attended many of the shows around *Art Basel Miami* and discovered a woman’s work at one of the

smaller shows. She painted perfectly wonderful figures of children in the manner of magic realism. We bought one and I got to talking to her. She works out of her garage in a city in the Midwest, working in obscurity, and she just loves doing it. It’s a collector’s dream to be able to support and promote an artist’s career. It’s a deep and abiding gift to the collector to be able to find someone in that position, to be able to collect them and to encourage them—to give them the opportunity to see themselves in a different light. I admire their laboring in obscurity, going in every day and working. It’s a very lonely calling.”

Bennett not only encourages as-yet-undiscovered artists, he supports some of the most important women artists working today—and he collects important pieces.

He owns Alyssa Monks’ *Loss*, which she painted after the loss of her mother. “I cherish the demonstration of her vulnerability,” he says. “The painting is also a bridge between what she was doing and her new wave of work of figures and nature.”

In the dining room there are three paintings by Katie O’Hagan. She and the collectors have become friends and she has painted *Portrait of the Collectors*, *Steven Alan Bennett* and *Dr. Elaine Melotti Schmidt*.

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In the dining room is Zoey Frank’s *Conversations*, 2014, oil on linen, which was featured in the October 2014 issue of *American Art Collector*. On the right is Rachel Moseley’s *Double Bubble*, 2015, oil on panel.

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Three Katie O’Hagan oil on linen paintings hang in the dining room, from left to right, *Figment*, 2014; *Brink*, 2015; and *Dirty Laundry*, 2013, which the collector purchased from the pages of *American Art Collector*.

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Andrea Kowch’s *Dream Chaser*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, is in the dining room. The piece was included in the December 2014 issue of *American Art Collector*.



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Bennett has a knack of bringing stories out his artist friends.

He first saw O'Hagan's painting *Dirty Laundry* in an ad for Haynes Galleries in an issue of *American Art Collector*. "I got in late and dropped the mail on the bedside table," he explains. "I was lying in bed on Saturday morning and reached for the magazine and saw the painting. I looked for my cellphone and called Gary Haynes and bought the painting. Occasionally you see paintings that you know are extraordinary. My eye told me, seeing *Dirty Laundry* in the magazine, that that's as good as it gets. I didn't know the artist at the time.

"I got in touch with her," he continues, "and told her 'I've bought this painting, explain it to me.' She said, 'Well, I live in a small town and I was in the midst of my divorce and I felt like I was standing naked in the middle of Main Street.'"

The collection now contains 10 or 12 of her paintings including the portrait of the collectors in which *Dirty Laundry* is hanging in the background. At the time of her visit to San Antonio to begin work on the portrait, *Dirty Laundry* was on the wall behind her at dinner. "I asked her to give me a little more color," Bennett says. "She said, 'I'm holding my wedding dress and my husband's tuxedo.' The real meaning popped out at that

moment. It took my appreciation of the painting as a visual masterwork to a new level."

The collection features several paintings by each of the artists. "I don't like to own just one painting by an artist," Bennett says, "it's not fair to the collection. An artist is more than one work."

Another artist he owns in depth is Anna Wypych. Talking about her painting *Loading* he describes her works as "master classes in difficult stuff." *Loading* is Wypych's response to a Skype conversation in which the image staggered episodically on her screen. "It's the same figure seven times," he explains. "Each face has a different expression and the hands are in different positions."

Andrea Kowch's *Dream Chaser* is opposite the three O'Hagan's in the dining room. It's always a conversation starter. "*Dream Chaser* has a supernatural quality to it," he says. "It makes the hair stand up on the back of my neck. I don't know what it is. I can only guess. Everybody who sees it projects their own interpretation. It's from Richard Demato's RJD Gallery where we also bought *The Courtiers*. Andrea said her goal was to give each bird its own personality. And she did." Bennett buys many works from Demato's gallery.

He explains that in collecting "the most exciting



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Zoey Frank's *Parade*, 2015, oil on canvas, hangs in the family room.

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To the left is an oil on canvas by Anna Wypych from 2014 titled *Hormones*. Above the bed is Suzanne Anan's *Legend*, 2016, oil on canvas.

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On the left is Candice Bohannon's *Grace*, 2012, oil on linen. Pamela Wilson's *Carmella*, Called by the *Cerulean Sea*, 2014, oil on canvas, is through the arch. The piece was featured on the cover of *American Art Collector's* June 2014 issue. On the right is Katie O'Hagan's *Portrait of the Collectors*, Steven Alan Bennett and Dr. Elaine Melotti Schmidt, 2015, oil on linen.



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**9**  
On the left is Xenia Hausner's *Alles Walzer*, 1997, acrylic on panel, while Anna Wypych's *Blue*, 2015, oil on icon panel, is on the right.

**10**  
Hanging above the bed is Anna Wypych's *Loading*, 2013, oil on canvas.

**11**  
Above the dresser is Suzanne Anan's *Love After Love*, 2015, oil on canvas. In the hall is Patricia Watwood's *Venus Apocalypse*, 2013, oil on linen. On the right is Lee Price's *Tea Cup*, 2014, oil on linen.

thing continues to be finding people like that painter in the Midwest. There are people out there laboring in obscurity who just need an opportunity to be discovered—for someone to pay attention just a little. Collectors can change artists and artists can change collectors," he continues. "The collection has changed me. Every single acquisition expands my vision and sharpens it."

He observes, "I think artists do a marvelous service to society especially in the U.S. where people understand less and less about the arts. We aren't nurturing that part of young people that makes them artists and that makes them admirers of cultural production.

"Collecting is a journey that never ends. It's like a river that flows through one's being. In the young collector it meanders. When you're older the river is wide and strong and cuts a clearer swath.

"If I could give any advice," he continues, "it's when you see what turns you on don't hesitate to acquire it. Of course, you have to look at your bank account, but the truth of the matter is what it does to you and that it's kind of a transcendent experience. Let yourself be carried away. Who cares, truthfully, if it doesn't move others. If it sweeps you up, grab it." ●



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