

PARK



Christine
Mack ART WORLD
POWERHOUSE



PARK

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VOLUME 4, NO.3

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FEATURE



Christine MACK

THE ART WORLD'S
CONNECTOR-IN-CHIEF

BY R. COURI HAY

Philanthropist Christine Mack has been collecting art for more than two decades, mainly guided by her instinct, and has quietly emerged as a powerhouse in the New York art world. She's become something of a patron to emerging artists, establishing the Mack Art Foundation in 2023, which offers New York City residency to artists from around the world and entrée to the city's art ecosystem with her hands-on guidance.

Her mission extends beyond collecting; she is deeply committed to nurturing young talents through mentorship and financial support.

Mack serves on the boards and committees of major cultural institutions including the Guggenheim Museum, Moderna Museet Stockholm, Studio Museum in Harlem, and Buffalo AKG Art Museum, The Jewish Museum and Brooklyn Museum. She's also become a board member of the Southampton Arts Center, where she was honored at this year's SummerFest gala. And yet despite her lofty credentials, Mack felt self-doubt when this summer SAC exhibited her collection, which included works by blue-chip names like Cindy Sherman, Robert Rauschenberg and Barbara Kruger alongside those of lesser-known artists.

Nerves for Southampton exhibit: It's right next to Peter Marino!

"I was so humbled to be part of Southampton Arts Center, and a little, I must say, insecure, to show my collection because I never saw myself as that caliber of art collector," Mack said. Her collection includes paintings, sculptural works in ceramics, bronze and wood as well as textiles and glass by a diverse range of artists. "I mean, I have some nice works, don't get me wrong. I am blessed. I have a lot of Rashid Johnson and KAWS; I collected early. But it's right next to the Peter Marino Foundation, and I was like, I can't show my emerging artists."

Her fears were unfounded. She believes the show, aptly titled "Beyond the Present: Collecting for the Future," comprising over 80 pieces, was welcomed in a different way by the community, because many of her artists are young, colorful and vibrant. And people in the art world that attended the exhibition were interested in many of them as well.

"They've said that it's one of the best exhibitions they've had because of that. It's very friendly," Mack said. "I have sculptures that kids can touch, I have a bench that they can sit on. I have a happy video. It's colorful, it's happy. It was very well received."

Long involvement with SAC

Of course, Mack has been a longtime supporter of Southampton Arts Center, and the organization's executive director Christina Mossaides Strassfield co-curated the exhibit alongside art historian Natasha Schlesinger, who sits on the Mack Art Foundation's advisory board.

"To work with Christina and [general manager] Joe Diamond and the staff, and [chair] Simone Levinson of course, was just incredible," Mack said. Though she hasn't known Levinson for too long, they've become close friends. "She has always been supportive," Mack said. "I think her and I were sisters once because we're both hands-on passionate. We have that connection. And when they wanted to honor me, of course – how



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CHRISTIAN HOGSTEDT

PHOTO WESTON WELLS
ARTIST ALEXANDER JAMES



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can I say no to Simone?” And despite her reservations, Mack is delighted with how it all turned out. “I felt like I wasn’t ready, but I didn’t realize what I was doing was already being recognized. I was doing it because I thought it was fun. And I love these artists. I mean, they’re my family.”

Establishing an art hub

Icing on the cake, the show gave Mack a platform with which she could talk to collectors about the importance of helping and sponsoring emerging artists. Her upcoming project is a step further than her residency program, building an art hub in which artists and collectors can come together, without middlemen like galleries. She told the SAC visitors that she’ll build the platform to have access and learn about what the artists are doing and get to know them better. “We’re trying to work out what we can do in order to fundraise, but do it in a fun way, not just writing a check.” It won’t be a costly endeavor, perhaps underwriting art supplies for three months for a cohort of artists. “So that’s where I am right now, and I think the Southampton Arts Center really gave me that platform for my mission.

It’s been really wonderful. I love the team there so much. And I just got on the board; of course, because how can I not?”

Mack Art Foundation, serendipitous timing

Mack stumbled upon the idea of forming her foundation after she’d organized a collaboration with the artist Kaws for a giant sculpture at a new apartment building on the Greenpoint, Brooklyn waterfront in which her husband, a real estate developer, had an interest. While working on that project, she noticed a beautiful retail space and wondered why it was empty after a long time. It turned out to be dedicated community space set aside for non-profits, and it was still unspoken for. “I said I’d love to rent the space, but they said, well, you need to be a non-for-profit.” So she set one up.

To form the non-profit, she needed to have a mission, and hers was to bring artists and culture back to an area that’s been gentrified and create community service projects. “That was always what I wanted to do anyway, and it was a true mission, for people in the neighborhood to go to an art studio

there, they can meet the artist and it's actually been the mission of my whole foundation." The visiting artist gets the studio space plus a small apartment in the building for the duration of their residency. She tapped her contacts in the gallery world for advice on how to outfit an art studio and built out the raw space.

"In hindsight, that's why I started the foundation, to be able to get this space. And then I realized, having this foundation, I can give out stipends." With the foundation, she can sponsor other things, like support an organization she works with that does public art installations for kids in underserved schools. "They painted a ground mural on basketball court in the Bronx. I helped them finish it."



PHOTOS BY
CHRISTIAN HOGSTEDT

While still figuring out how to make it work, applications were flooding in by word of mouth. "Of course, come to New York, get an apartment, have access to everything," Mack said. She set up her website, established a distinguished advisory board with the likes of Rashid Johnson, Kaws, Liz Munsell, a contemporary curator, Katarina Swanström, head of development at Moderna Museet, and Natasha Schlesinger, who co-curated Mack's SAC exhibit.

The mother hen to her artists

Mack is like the art world networking guru - she calls herself the mother hen - nurturing and introducing everyone. She's had applicants from all over the world, and hoping to expand the reach to Asia, South Africa and elsewhere. An Afro-Brazilian artist is in the residency now.

"He doesn't speak English that well, but he is already getting better at it!"

Innovative foundation financing

It was all coming together nicely, but she needed to find a way to continue to fund the residency in the future. She'd been collecting for a long time and bought pieces early that have appreciated over the years. It's a bit complicated, but basically she can donate a painting that she owns to the foundation, give it back to the gallery it came from originally to sell, and use the proceeds to fund the nonprofit project. "They're pieces that I kind of miss, but I would rather use that money to support artists instead".

And she's making plans for the aforementioned art hub in the same Brooklyn location. It will not necessarily include housing, but be a venue for several artists working together in a space she has already leased. She's creating an advisory committee that so they'll be vetted, good artists that don't have gallery representation. "There are so many artists that don't," she added. They'll do an exhibition - it will look like a gallery but it's not - and the artists can sell directly to the collector.

And these days, people in the art world realize that when Mack shows up somewhere, she usually brings along some other artists. "I don't really care if they think it's annoying or not, but actually, they're very interested in meeting these artists because many of them do well after. And I'm like, 'I told you.' And I don't have any skin in the game, so it's just pure pride."

Mother-in-law inspiration

Mack's mother-in-law, Phyllis Mack, also a collector, has been a big inspiration. Back in the 1980s she and a close friend and art advisor collected as much as they could. They lived in Great Neck, on Long Island, and in those days the art scene was different; they went to galleries, there were no waitlists, you could buy two or three pieces. "They bought all these Cindy Sherman and Rauchenberg works. These women were amazing. And I always feel like my mother-in-law never got, I don't know, the recognition. I mean, she made such good art decisions."



When Christine and her husband, Richard Mack, moved into their Manhattan townhouse, they got a little starter kit from Phyllis's collection. "We didn't have art, and I think that generation never put stuff in storage." The young couple got a Rauschenberg a Cindy Sherman and a Sol Lewitt; Christine felt like she got a base for her collection.

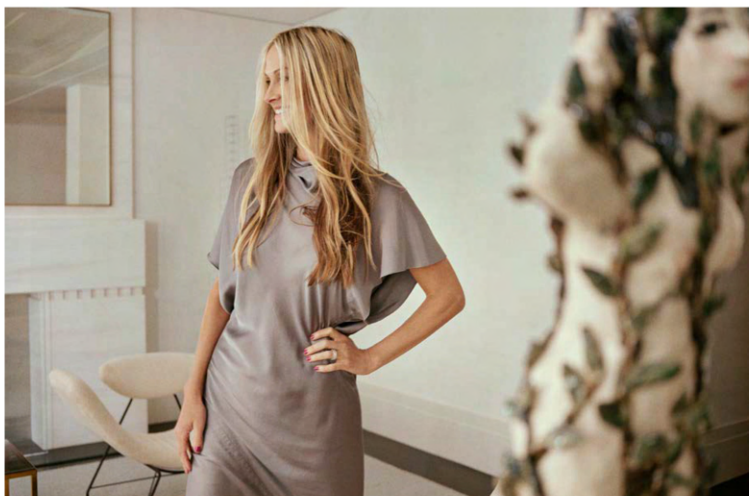
"She always had a very good eye with strong art, and she inspired me to be bold in terms of my collecting." That was evident in the SAC exhibition this summer, when Mack's huge Ana Benaroya painting was hung in the front gallery next to a Keith Haring. "That made me so happy because Ana is an incredible artist."

Early life in Philippines; love for NYC

Mack was born in the Philippines. Her Swedish mother worked at the Swedish embassy in Manila, and her American father had an international business that kept him constantly traveling. They divorced before Christine was born; her father moved back to the U.S. while she and her older sister and their mom stayed in Manila. When she was 7, they moved to Stockholm, and she and her sister had to adapt to a new culture and learn the Swedish language. "Every summer we visited my dad in New York, and from those visits I fell in love with the city and knew I wanted to live there someday."

She started modeling at a young age, at first in Paris and Milan, but then realized her dream and made New York her base. She crossed the world for photo shoots, but after eight years of constant traveling, Mack realized she wanted something more lasting, and she'd never truly loved modeling anyway.

PHOTOS BY
CHRISTIAN HOGSTEDT



By then she'd saved enough to buy her first apartment, and decided to go back to school, enrolled at Parsons, and earned a degree in graphic design and advertising. "It felt like a natural step, combining my creativity with something I could build a future on." She went on to work as a graphic designer and art director, eventually starting her own design firm.

She met her husband at age 23, and soon began a family. After her second son was born, she closed her office and transitioned to working from home. "Today, I have three amazing, hardworking sons whom I am extremely proud of." Her youngest is now in college, leaving her free to devote all her energy to building her foundation and pursuing her passion for art and philanthropy. Her background in graphic design is a boon for directing photo shoots with her artists and designing marketing materials for the foundation.

Space2Curate: pandemic-era education

Along with her friend and colleague, Natasha Schlesinger, Mack founded *Space2Curate*, a platform which organized exhibitions in public spaces in Los Angeles and Brooklyn. Many of their projects got shut down once Covid hit, and she decided to use the pause to deepen

her knowledge of the art world, completing eight certificate programs at Sotheby's and Christie's. She studied subjects like the global art market, curating exhibitions, writing about art, art history, and how to open a gallery—which she promised herself she will never do after taking the class!

"Looking back, the silver lining of that period gave me the chance to further educate myself and gain the tools I needed to pursue what I'm doing today," Mack said.

Lifelong philanthropist – before discovering art

Mack's charitable activities extend beyond the art world, and, in fact, she was active in philanthropy long before she became a collector. Even in her younger years as a graphic designer, she did pro bono work, and later, after marriage, got involved with causes important to her, like children's mental health and sports. "I was an advocate for partnership with drug-free kids. I taught workshops to educate parents about drug abuse. I was on the board of the Childhood Foundation, whose mission was to end sexual abuse towards children. So the art thing came much later for me."

Later, as her children got older and she had more time to travel, her interest in art

blossomed. "I went to Art Basel for the first time in Miami and it just opened up my eyes realizing, oh, there is a world out there with so much art."

Followed her gut

With her collecting, Mack says she followed her gut. She's bought a lot of work by Black, LGBTQ and female artists. For a while she was into women artists painting themselves. "I found that the female gaze was very important to me." Now she's very interested in Nordic art, an area she feels is somewhat untapped.

"I feel like there's so many opportunities, but it's hard work. I have a studio manager who's an artist. I've never thought that I needed an assistant, but now it's like there's so much going on," she said. Mack is increasingly in demand for speaking engagements here and abroad.

Some of the artists she supports make it and some don't, but she wants to encourage them in something that is so meaningful and maybe vital for them. "I'm doing what I love to do and that's it," she said. After a pause: "Maybe I'll get an assistant." **P**

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