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ART REVIEW

Appetite for New and Next New

By [ROBERTA SMITH](#)

Maybe we don't need to be reminded that the American art of the late 1950s and '60s moved with ferocious speed. Those were the glory days, we've been taught, repeatedly and indelibly.

Still, the momentum is especially — and poignantly — palpable in “Robert & Ethel Scull: Portrait of a Collection,” at Acquavella Galleries in Manhattan. The show, which was proposed to Acquavella by the writer Judith Goldman, contains 37 paintings, sculptures and drawings, along with some photo documentation. It rushes from Abstract Expressionist paintings like [Willem de Kooning's](#) whiplash “Police Gazette” of 1955 to the Earthworks that Michael Heizer began cutting in the floor of the Nevada desert in 1968. In between are efforts by a string of impressive names: paintings by [Jasper Johns](#), [James Rosenquist](#), Myron Stout, Larry Poons, [Andy Warhol](#) and [Frank Stella](#); sculptures by Mark di Suvero, John Chamberlain and Claes Oldenburg, Walter De Maria and Robert Morris.

All told, this exhibition conveys an amazing appetite and instinct for the new, the next new and the next new after that. These impulses propelled Robert Scull, and his wife, Ethel, through one of the greatest, most influential shopping sprees in postwar American art. It came to a screeching halt in the fall of 1973, with an auction at Sotheby Parke Bernet, as Sotheby's was then called, two blocks north of the [Whitney Museum](#).

That auction, “The Collection of Robert C. Scull,” was the first of contemporary American art by a single seller. Its 50 lots of mostly Pop Art brought in \$2.2 million (about \$10.8 million in 2010 dollars), just above the high estimate, along with stunning evidence that the value of 1960s art would rise exponentially. It was immediately seen as a fall from grace for the Sculls — nouveaux riches cashing in — and the New York art world too.

It supposedly gave birth to what many think of as the mercenary art market of today. Actually, things were pretty quiet for the rest of the 1970s, and the Sculls had already shocked certain quarters of the art world in 1965 by auctioning more than 20 Abstract Expressionist paintings in order to buy Pop Art. (At the time, [Mark Rothko](#) took it as further depressing evidence that his “moment” — barely a decade old — had already passed.)

This exhibition's biographical focus accounts for much of its impact. In tandem with Ms. Goldman's detailed, must-read catalog, the show is a kind of “It's a Wonderful Life” for the art world. In attempting to pay tribute to and perhaps exonerate the collectors most synonymous with the Swinging '60s, it demonstrates what a difference one or two people can make.

The Sculls contributed to the art of their time by buying the efforts of struggling, unknown artists; providing

money in advance so the artists could make work; commissioning pieces and at times serving as the subjects of those commissions, often with substantial results. Robert commissioned a portrait of Ethel from Andy Warhol, which became the 1963 painting "Ethel Scull 36 Times"; it was the first time Warhol used photographs he had taken — although in a photo booth — rather than found in a magazine.

Another first: the use of repeating but not identical images of one person, a strategy he shortly employed with great resonance in his paintings of [Jacqueline Kennedy](#) at President [John F. Kennedy](#)'s funeral.

Ms. Goldman details the Sculls' social rise; their relationships with dealers like [Leo Castelli](#) and his far-sighted director, Ivan Karp; their competition with other collectors-on-the-jump, like the Burton Tremaines.

Her portrait of the complex Mr. Scull — possessive, brash, mercurial, generous and brutal — is especially engaging. A would-be artist who became a taxi-tycoon and self-made millionaire (building on the largesse of his father-in-law), he grew up on the Lower East Side, the son of an immigrant tailor. He started educating himself after an epiphanic visit to the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) when he was 10. In the late 1950s he and his wife quickly assembled an impressive collection of Abstract Expressionists. Their first commission was to Franz Kline, for a large painting that would serve as a room divider in their house in Great Neck, N.Y.

In the 1960s, Pop, Minimalism, Conceptual Art and Earthworks arrived in rapid succession, and the Sculls were there, often buying first and best. From 1960 to 1964, they quietly backed Richard Bellamy's Green Gallery, perhaps the most prescient gallery of the time, known for showing — often in debuts — artists like Mr. Rosenquist, Lucas Samaras, Tom Wesselmann, [Dan Flavin](#), Lee Bontecou and [Donald Judd](#) (as a sculptor; he had two solo shows of paintings in New York in the 1950s). Starting in 1968, the Sculls financed some of Mr. Heizer's first, best-known Earthwork sculptures in Nevada.

The show is a dazzling sight, although it is unfortunate that Acquavella didn't rent a larger and cleaner space; the art could use a lot more room and a lot less Gilded Age molding and paneling. The low point for me is a Frank Stella shaped copper painting, the 1964 "Slieve Roe," hanging over a fireplace. Sometimes compared to a plaque, its large V-form looks here like a shield, or abstract antlers. Maybe it is the subversive classicism of the casts of human arms that enables Bruce Nauman's "Bound to Fail," hanging above another fireplace, to succeed.

It is also a bit dismaying that the lavishly illustrated catalog contains so many additional works that would have been thrilling to see. Many of these couldn't be borrowed because they are in overseas museums, like two painted plaster reliefs by Mr. Oldenburg that are now in the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Germany. It would have been nice to see John Tweddle's folk-artish painting "UT April/September 1968." It looks great in the catalog and might have served as a reminder that some of the Scull purchases have maintained their visual strength without going gold price-wise.

The representation is also not always proportionate. One small Dadaist sculpture by Robert Morris stands in for the dozen owned by the Sculls, while six works by Mr. Johns better indicate the 22 they had, many of them quite significant. Ms. Goldman traces the Sculls' initially close, then off-on and ultimately off relationship with Mr. Johns, which after several rounds culminated in the collectors' being sold a

long-awaited map painting that was inscribed only to Ethel.

Several works suggest the importance to the Sculls of Mr. Di Suvero, whose great “Hankchampion” (not in the show) they gave to the Whitney, as Ms. Goldman explains, because Mr. Bellamy gave them a steep discount on several pieces with the proviso that two would go to the museum. It is great to see the boxed cache of eight of Mr. Oldenburg’s Ray-Gun sculptures, made of found materials as well as of plaster and paint, and his newsprint-collage mock-up for an exhibition poster loaded with the names of many, many other artists of the 1960s.

The suave, eerie displacements of the early Rosenquist paintings and their icy renditions of women’s legs in nylons seem very now, very “Mad Men.” And the giant Warhol “Flowers” takes the advertising-based style even further, achieving a timeless sense of the ephemeral. It finds a perfect foil in its neighbor: a tiny red Warhol canvas of repeating airmail stamps (seven-cent!) achieved with a rubber stamp. Its wandering irregular rows resemble needlework.

This show is less about art than about ethos, ego and maybe hubris. The crowded installation and even the absent art contribute to a sense of careering velocity with which the Sculls and their collection came and went.

Why did Robert Scull sell? In the catalog essay, Ms. Goldman implies that the couple needed money. She lingers over photographs of Ethel Scull at the auction, noting the sadness of her face.

“Only she understands that something irreparable has occurred,” Ms. Goldman writes. For Ethel there were more losses to come, as signaled by the auction’s title, which left out her name. A contentious divorce in 1975 was followed by a long legal battle over the substantial art holdings that remained, settled only in 1986, several months after Robert’s death.

But the Sculls’ legacy is about intangibles. Along for the ride, they more than paid their way.

“Robert & Ethel Scull: Portrait of a Collection” continues through May 27 at Acquavella Galleries, 18 East 79th Street, Manhattan; (212) 734-6300, acquavellagalleries.com.

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