



FRANK COHEN: DO-IT-YOURSELF

By Elaine W. Ng

Like the Astors, Rockefellers, Fricks and other industrialist art collectors of the early 20th century, Frank Cohen is determined to get what he wants, and he will work for it, unlike the spoiled hedge-fund collectors of today. With a hoard of over 1,500 art works, Cohen is regularly cited as one of Britain's most important collectors. Since the early 1970s, he has collected art according to his own taste and vision, first pursuing the British modernists with whom he identifies, before moving towards the contemporary works that have been in great demand in Europe, the US and, more recently, Asia.

The depth and range of Cohen's acquisitions have inspired the brusque British media to dub him the "Saatchi of the North," in reference to Britain's most high-profile collector and former ad-man Charles Saatchi. There are similarities, no doubt, in their passion for art and their Jewish origins, but that is where the comparison stops. Unlike his London counterpart, Cohen is gregarious and forthright. He is not shy with the press, and he phones his two twenty-something children—both work for the powerhouse Gagosian Gallery, his daughter in London and son in New York—as frequently as 15 times a day. Cohen also travels regularly with his family and perhaps most importantly, doesn't dump artworks on the auction block from one season to the next, to the great relief of many artists.

A self-made millionaire who left school at 14, Cohen built an empire of home improvement stores in northern England. In the 1980s, he began making regular trips to China seeking out wallpaper and paintbrushes to import to the UK. On those trips, he befriended Hong Kong-British high-society favorite Sir David Tang, one of earliest committed collectors of contemporary Chinese art. However, while they became close friends, Cohen did not initially share Tang's enthusiasm for New Art from China. It was only in 1997, when a different kind of "handover" took place—Cohen sold his chain of Glyn Webb "Do-It-Yourself" stores for GBP 25 million (USD 40 million in

1997)—that he flowered into a renaissance collector.

Prior to that, his treasures spanned the 20th-century British establishment, from painters LS Lowry, Frank Auerbach and David Hockney to the bleeding-edge work of the Young British Artists. Cohen makes no claims of being a pioneer and graciously credits Saatchi as a source of inspiration. But when Cohen retired from office work, he threw himself into art and cast his gaze beyond the English Channel. He began with German artists such as Matthias Weischer, Franz Ackerman and Tobias Rehberger. Cohen then cast his eye across the Atlantic to towering American art figures including Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman and Jack Pierson.

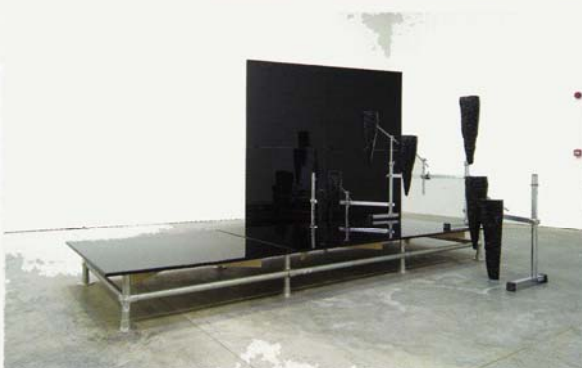
Now in his mid-60s, Cohen has shifted his sights further eastward. He recounts how a decade after encountering the paintings in David Tang's luxurious private China Club—where monumental paintings by Liu Wei (SEE AAP 48, 53), Zhang Xiaogang and Zeng Fanzhi graced the walls—he finally understood what transfixed Tang. Now Cohen excitedly comments on the subject, noting the quality and the energy of the artists. More recently, Cohen has embraced India. Though he and his wife have traveled to the Subcontinent over the past 20 years, he only began looking at Indian work seriously two years ago.

While Cohen befriends all the artists he collects, he prefers to maintain his distance and acquire work from dealers. He is neither fussy nor pretentious about his collection and admits that he merely follows his initial gut response to the art when he buys. He travels to exhibitions, consumes art journals and auction catalogs from Sotheby's to Saffronart, but he avoids buying under pressure, instead respecting the artist-gallery relationship and working closely with his advisor Nicolai Frahm and curator David Thorp.

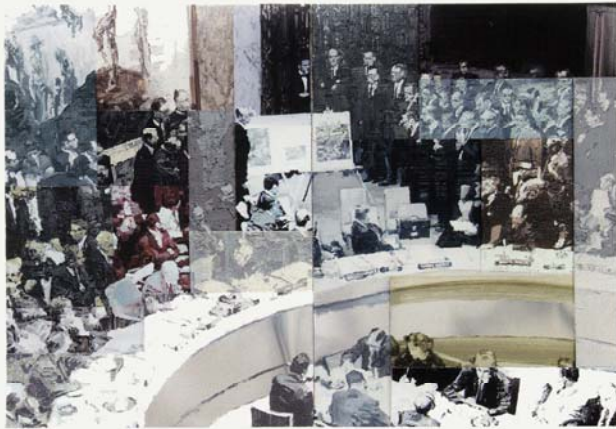
His burgeoning collection occupies three warehouses in his native Manchester, where he still lives. In four years he has amassed 120 significant works by Chinese and Indian artists. Among his favorites is the lush four-meter-long canvas *Cuban Sugar Crisis* (2006) by Li Songsong (SEE AAP 48), one of the strongest young painters working in Beijing today, whom Cohen met via Swiss gallerist Urs Meile. Li's work, based on a news-agency photograph that relates to the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, is stylistically rich in painterly technique and color, as well as cultural and historical significance—a perfect expression of Cohen's long love affair with epic-style paintings.

As the steward of one of Britain's largest private collections of contemporary art, Cohen recently began talks with the Manchester City Council about establishing the region's first museum devoted to art from the 20th century to the present day. It was to be called FC Museum of Contemporary Art (FC MoCA), but, according to Cohen, the negotiations quickly became bogged down by the city's cultural bureaucracy. Last year, like many of his peers, he set up his own 10,000-square-foot public exhibition space, Initial Access, in Wolverhampton, a small town outside of Manchester. Not an obvious location for cutting-edge art.

Cohen is as loyal to his hometown as he is to his collection. Although dressed for art-world success in a sober ensemble of black Yohji Yamamoto and Jill Sander, along with fashionable round eyeglass frames, he exudes an endearing boyish charm when chatting about his love of Manchester, raising subjects that some might deem uncouth or wondering aloud why some of the artists whose work he has acquired have yet to attract a following. When the plans for FC MoCA began to crumble, he contemplated how the art scene thrives in New York, "with all those daft buildings. When all my life I was



(This Page, From Top to Bottom) LN TALLUR — *Esophageal Reflex* (2006) Burnt wood and silver, 200 x 160 x 90 cm; JAGANNATH PANDA — *God and Goat* (2007) Fiberglass, fabric, glue, tin box and enamel paint, 80 x 70 x 54 cm; BANKS VIOLETTE — *Hate Them (Single Stage)* (2004) Polystyrene, polyurethane, tinted epoxy, wood, steel, drum stands and hardware, 137 x 264 x 31 cm; Installation view of "Passage to India" exhibition at Initial Access, Wolverhampton, 2008. All images courtesy Frank Cohen Collection. (Opposite Page) Frank Cohen. Photograph by Steve Forrest for ArtAsiaPacific.



doing business in the same kind of warehouses, or sheds as we in Manchester like to call them.” In early 2007, he transformed one of his Wolverhampton “sheds,” replacing the wholesale goods—shovels, buckets, paint and glue, that were once on sale to home builders—with art made of many of the same materials.

Initial Access kicked off its third exhibition in March with “Passage to India,” the first single-owner collection of 21st-century art from India on view anywhere in the world. Among the most iconic works is Bharti Kher’s *The Skin Speaks a Language Not Its Own* (SEE AAP 56 & P. 111), a bindi-covered, life-size slumbering elephant made of fiberglass, first commissioned by the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane for their Asia Pacific Triennial in 2006. A second edition was made for the Art Unlimited section of Art Basel in 2007, where a Swiss collector pounced on it just minutes before Cohen’s approach. He bought the third (and final) edition of the pachyderm, which was on view at Kher’s solo show at Jack Shainman in New York last November. “Passage” also includes names currently on the personal wish lists of many collectors looking to stock up on the next big superstars: Thukral & Tagra, Sudharshan Shetty (SEE AAP 50) and Subodh Gupta (SEE AAP 48). Since opening this show, Cohen has received numerous emails, including some from India, mistaking his private museum for a commercial gallery and inquiring what is for sale. He quickly replies, “Of course, nothing is.” Although British journalists criticize Cohen’s brash collecting style, his reputation has not been sullied by “flipping,” the speculative buying and selling of artworks.



Curated by Thorp, “Passage to India” is not overhung and is free of interpretive wall texts. Cohen smiles broadly as he strolls through the show and notes that a surprising number of visitors have come to this friendly rural village to see the show. Among those enduring the three-hour journey from London are busloads of students and an entourage of ladies from London’s exclusive Eaton Square neighborhood, with their private cars and drivers, on their own “Passage to India.” At noon, he treated these ladies to local pub fare. He recalls, “They absolutely loved it, the shepherd’s pie and a pint. Afterwards, the young woman looking after them asked to settle the bill. I told her it was £67 (\$135). She actually asked, ‘Per person?’ Fabulous. It’s a bit like Beverly Hills, Palm Springs and the Hamptons here.”



But Cohen is less flippant when he explains that he does not buy work because of its national or historical significance. Nor does he have any intention of “giving the artwork back” to the countries where it comes from. With shrewd business acumen and disarming honesty, he reflects, “Some people promise to give stuff back as a way of getting it in the first place. And then eventually they don’t. What they actually do is stick it in the auctions, and then it disappears. I’m not saying I would never consider repatriation, but I never like to kid anyone about anything. I love what I am doing. I fund this all myself, I apply for no grants and no one sponsors me.”

One of Cohen’s goals is to create meaningful relationships among the works he owns when organizing shows, and he leaves this to Thorp, who has spent time at PS1 in New York, the Henry Moore Foundation and presently London’s Royal College of Art.

Thorp, who travels to Asia regularly, curated “Time Difference” for Cohen last year. The show featured Chinese painters such as Liu Ye alongside American installation artists like Banks Violette, artists of the same generation who share similar concerns and sensibilities. Although Cohen, an influential tastemaker, has shifted his focus to Asia at the moment, he remarks about artists in China and India: “They don’t want to sell only to Westerners and why should they?”



(From Top to Bottom) LI SONGSONG — *Cuban Sugar Crisis* (2006) Oil on aluminium panels, 280 x 400 cm; SUBODH GUPTA — *Idol Thief* (2007) Oil on canvas, 229 x 268 cm; LIU YE — *International Blue* (2006) Acrylic and oil on canvas, 2 panels, 210 x 410 cm overall; ZHENG GUOQU — *Computer Controlled by a Pig’s Brain* (2003) Textile, 240 x 164 cm. (Opposite Page) Frank Cohen with works by Sudarshan Shetty. Photograph by Steve Forrest for ArtAsiaPacific. For more about artworks at Initial Access visit www.initialaccess.co.uk

