DANTE, VIRGINIA
Photographs by Mike Smith

Mike Smith is a photographer based in Johnson City, Tennessee. His monograph, You're Not From Around Here: Photographs of East Tennessee, was published by the Center for American Places and Columbia College Chicago in 2004.
Betting on Photo Futures

Museums Hang Works That You Too Can Buy; A Rising Star for $600

By NANCY ANN JEFFREY
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

AS A PART of a major expansion effort, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston recently went on a buying spree. Among its prized new acquisitions: a black-and-white landscape scene by Millet.

No, not Jean-François Millet, the celebrated 19th-century French painter. What the museum bought was the work of Laurent Millet, an obscure, 30-something photographer whose works sell for as little as $500. Anne Tucker, the curator who oversaw the purchase, says she likes such photographs for "their very affordability."

Take heart, budget collectors. Major museums across the country are gambling on some promising photographers whose works you can actually afford. Many of these photographers—from Mr. Millet to 30-year-old Chris Verene—usually sell for anywhere from $600 to $5,000. It's the same strategy used by neophyte buyers everywhere: Lay a relatively cheap bet on artists who might someday be big names—the next Alfred Stieglitz, Robert Mapplethorpe or Cindy Sherman.

A Ground-Floor Opportunity

In much of the art world, where the best works often command seven or eight figures, such bargain-hunting isn't possible anymore. But photography has boomed as a collecting field only in the last 15 years. As a result, while a few contemporary photographers such as Nan Goldin and Cindy Sherman have become well known, the window for superstars is still wide open. That means museums—as well as private collectors—can get in on the ground floor.

The Houston museum, for example, has acquired more than a dozen photographers whose prices range from $600 to several thousand dollars, including Mr. Millet and several other little-known artists such as Jack Spencer, Mario Cravo Neto and Carl Clark. The Art Institute of Chicago recently bought pictures by Andrew Borowicz, who photographs post-industrial towns along the Ohio River and whose works typically sell for about $700. The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York has purchased works by Stanley Greenberg, whose photographs of New York City's infrastructure sell for $1,250 to $3,500, and David Goldes, whose abstractions of everyday objects run about $1,000.

Another emerging photographer popular with museums is Mr. Verene, who takes pictures of men taking "cheesecake" pictures of women. Atlanta's High Museum of Art owns four of his photographs, and the Whitney says it plans to acquire one of Mr. Verene's works for its permanent collection. His typical prices: about $1,200 to $4,000.

If any of these photographers emerge as major names, the museums that acquired them will be patting themselves on the back. Not only do museums, like everyone else, like to see history validate their judgments, but owning important works also elevates a museum's stature. Some museums have already seen such bets pay off; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, for example, started acquiring Cindy Sherman's work in the early 1980s. Says Doug Nickel, curator of photography there: "It's gratifying to know that you bought them when you could still afford them."

Collectors, of course, enjoy such gratification as well. John Bennette, a clerck for a Wall Street clearinghouse in New York.
A Developing Market

Here are some affordable photographers whose works are being acquired by museums and key dealers who sell them. Their works may also be available at other galleries. To find a dealer in your area, call the Association of International Photography Art Dealers at 202-986-0105.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHOTOGRAPHER</th>
<th>PRICE RANGE</th>
<th>DEALER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brad Richman</td>
<td>$500</td>
<td>Lee Marks Fine Art, Shelbyville, Ind., 317-399-6212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Borowiec</td>
<td>$700</td>
<td>Lee Marks Fine Art</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jack Spencer</td>
<td>$750-$2,000</td>
<td>Catherine Edelman Gallery, Chicago; 312-266-2350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike Smith</td>
<td>$1,200-$2,000</td>
<td>Yancey Richardson Gallery, N.Y., 212-343-1255</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chris Vereen</td>
<td>$1,200-$4,000</td>
<td>Vokoin Schwartz, Atlanta; 404-351-0035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laurent Millet</td>
<td>$900-$1,600</td>
<td>Robert Mann Gallery, N.Y., 212-989-7600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abielardo Morell</td>
<td>$1,500-$7,500</td>
<td>Bonne Benneki Gallery, N.Y., 212-517-3788</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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buys contemporary photography under a self-imposed price limit of $1,000. Several photographers he has bought in the past, including a few works by fast-rising Cuban-born artist Abielardo Morell, have already risen in value. "I somehow manage to get there before other people do," says Mr. Bennette. Seeing these photographers reputations grow "says, yes, I am right."

To be sure, a photographer's presence in a museum is no guarantee that he or she will ever make a mark. "You can go through the collection of any museum and find hundreds of bad photographs," says the San Francisco museum's Mr. Nickel. For that reason, most museums are trying to hedge their bets by buying a battalion of little-known photographers. "I'm a baseball fan," says Ms. Tucker, of the Houston museum. "I figure if I can bat .340, if three out of 10 are really good purchases, that's a pretty good average."

But a museum's decision to purchase an artist is an encouraging sign. James Kohlenburg, a managing director for Chase H & H in New York, shares with museums a passion for Mr. Morell, whose works he has been acquiring for the past five years. When he buys contemporary photographers, Mr. Kohlenburg wants an artist to have a body of impressive work. "Anyone can produce one brilliant photograph but the question is, can you produce lots of brilliant photographs?" he asks.

Museums that have bought Mr. Morell's work in recent months include the Houston Museum, the Cleveland Museum of Art and the San Francisco museum. Even so, prices for much of Mr. Morell's work remain relatively low. The Cleveland museum recently acquired one of Mr. Morell's pictures, "Tim & Rembrandt, Gardner Museum," which juxtaposes a man in a museum and a Rembrandt self-portrait; the work sells for about $1,300.

Unlike Mr. Morell, who follows the black-and-white tradition of Stieglitz and other 20th-century heavyweights, many photographers catching the eyes of museums today work in color. One such artist is Mike Smith, a Tennessee-based photographer. His detailed landscapes of the American South usually range in price from $1,200 to $2,800. In recent months, Mr. Smith's works have been acquired by the Whitney and are about to be acquired by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the San Francisco modern-art museum. (A work by Mr. Smith and two by Mr. Greenberg were recently acquired by Dow Jones & Co., publisher of The Wall Street Journal.)

Budget Bets

Such budget bets are all the more attractive these days now that photographers in the high end of the market—such as Stieglitz and Man Ray—routinely sell in the five or six figures. The big photo auctions to be held next week in New York at Sotheby's Holdings Inc. and Christie's International are offering such material. A Sotheby's sale of works from the corporate collection of T-Eleven Inc., includes some striking Paul Strand and Man Ray images.

With low-priced photographers proving popular with museums and collectors, some dealers say they are actually holding down the prices of their artists to improve their chances of getting acquired. "My philosophy is that it's much more important to get them out into the world, in museums and interesting private collections," says Lee Marks, a dealer in Shelbyville, Indiana. "You can always raise the prices later." One person whose prices she has kept low is Brad Richman, a 29-year-old photographer whose images of pick-up basketball games sell for about $600. Mr. Richman's work was recently picked up by the Columbus Museum of Art in Ohio and the Art Institute of Chicago.

So is Mr. Richman the next Stieglitz? "I don't think so," says Catherine Evans; curator of photography for the Columbus museum. Still, she says his work is an appealing addition to the collection.

Other museum officials are similarly sanguine about the uncertain fate of their bargain purchases. Ms. Tucker of the Houston museum says she can live with the risk, though she hopes at least some of its acquisitions eventually make a splash. "What I'm hoping is that 50 years from now, when I'm long gone, someone will think this is a pretty interesting collection," Ms. Tucker says.
Photography
Scene in Tennessee

Though he occasionally photographs the people of Eastern Tennessee, Mike Smith, himself a sixteen-year resident of the state, is more likely to evoke their isolation—and watchful presence—through images of their homes and bounds. At Yancey Richardson Gallery, 560 Broadway, at Prince Street; through November 20.
PHOTOGRAPHY

Mike Smith / Mark Steinmetz—"You Aren’t from Around Here," a group of assured and often remarkable color landscapes and portraits made in the artist’s adopted home territory of eastern Tennessee. The compositions can be quite complex: in an image of a high-sloping pasture bisected by a fence, one side is green and dotted with cows, the other is burnt yellow and home to a telephone pole, an access road, and a stop sign. But Smith can also be deceptively simple, as in a view of a private, snow-dusted hollow out behind a barn./A handful of black-and-white photographs taken at night in the suburban South. Both shows through Nov. 20. (Richardson, 560 Broadway. 343-1255.)

"Carter County, TN" (1996), by Mike Smith, at Richardson (see Photography).
Mike Smith: Tennessee  People who drive the interstates of east Tennessee will see a region that looks like any other place in America, according to photographer Mike Smith, who has lived there for sixteen years. But Smith says he isn’t interested in the newly constructed department stores and suburban neighborhoods that have cropped up in recent years. “You have to go pretty far up into the hills to find what I’m looking for—certain places with wonderful names like ‘Lick Skillet’ and ‘Troublesome Hollow Road,’” he says. Exploring the remote parts of rural Appalachia on a motorcycle, Smith says he waits to stumble onto places where the light seems somehow tentative and mysterious. “I go all over the place because I love getting lost. I just want to know how to get home at the end of the day. I don’t want to know anything else.”