

Mary Stanley: On Living With Art | Interviewed by Barbara Griffin

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Mary Stanley is a whirlwind of energy and enthusiasm on the Atlanta cultural art scene. She is the passionate independent curator, art consultant, and arts advocate behind the Young Collector’s Club and Mary Stanley Studio. A veritable doyenne of photography, Mary is happiest when connecting collectors and artists, and believes in the joy we receive from living with great art. -Barbara Griffin

Barbara Griffin: *Mary, I love visiting your house. It’s always so warm and welcoming. And not only that, it’s an adventure every time.*

Mary Stanley: It’s so much more out of control than most people’s homes that I think people are delighted by it. And, challenged by it. I’ll never forget one time I wanted to hire John Oetgen, a really awesome interior designer, to help me redo my dining room, and he had to leave, it was too much for him. He said, “Maybe in that room, we could just have nothing on the wall.” (Laughs)

BG: *Some people can't live with controlled chaos, but I have a sense that you really thrive on it.*

MS: I do thrive on it!

BG: *One of the many things we have in common is that we're both maximalists.*

MS: Absolutely.

BG: *And, we love living with art. What does living with art mean, for you?*

MS: Art is a way of life for me. It is my "retirement career" after 25 years in nursing and hospital administration; I wanted to do something fun. I love event planning but did not want to work every weekend, so I looked to art for my next "work fix".



Mary Stanley ©Amanda Greene

I have worked all my life, since high school days, and not working did not suit me. I became intrigued with the challenge of selling art in Atlanta...as a problem solver this quest has taken me down many roads. I have changed my business model at least every two years since starting my business. After 12 years, these are things I know to be true:

#1 – I am a collector. If I had channeled all my resources into buying art, I would have a shit-kickin' collection now. As it is, I have a pretty respectable collection of emerging and established photographers, and a handful of good paintings.

#2- I have a strong commitment to making Atlanta a great place for artists to live and work. 12 years on the MOCA GA Board. Ten years with Atlanta Celebrates Photography. Seven years with Idea Capital (raising money to award small yet important grants to artists in all disciplines in the five-county metro area). Eight years on the Board of Visitors for the Lamar Dodd School of Art at University of Georgia (UGA). I have also provided internships for students from LDSOA (UGA), Savannah College of Art and Design, GA State University, Art Institute of Chicago and others. I am committed to introducing my collectors to talented artists from around the globe.

#3 – I LOVE working with artists and other creative people. It energizes me and results in an obsessive amount of great ideas...many of which have come to fruition.

#4 – Art is very personal. No one in my life appreciates all the art that I like. My family has both benefitted and been challenged by “living with me and my art.” The maximalist in me can overwhelm even the seasoned enthusiast.

#5 – Being an Artist Representative is a very demanding role. One can never do enough marketing and networking on behalf of the talented artists of the world. The Internet has resulted in an amazing new dynamic for art sales and artist promotion. I do not feel it is an effective platform for art sales, but harnessing its power clearly creates limitless tasks and opportunities.

#6 At the end of every day, I can look at the beautiful work I’ve collected, the artists that I’ve believed in and supported in small and large ways, and the energy I feel now and know that I’ve made a difference in my local community and beyond. The “happiness factor” created when collectors find great art, and serious artists find worthy collectors is my reward.

BG: You are an artistic force of nature in terms of how you collect, how you display your art, and how you function within the Atlanta art community. In 2006 you founded the Young Collectors Club (YCC). What was your inspiration for YCC, and what is its mission?

MS: It seemed to me that in Atlanta everyone possessed certain luxury items. Every swanky home had flat screen TVs and an SUV parked in the driveway. Oddly, very few ever had exciting artwork. An oil painting of the children, or the matriarch, and some decorative still life or landscape painting was the standard fare. I wanted to shake that

up. I couldn't understand why these people didn't have great art, and I decided that if I could educate and expose them to some perhaps I could change their priorities. I began to focus on educating young professionals about contemporary art in hopes that they would buy some.

The club started small with 20 handpicked members from an eclectic circle of friends working in many different disciplines from law and medicine to interior design, art, and real estate. I curated experiences to meet with artists, curators, and collectors hoping to get a bit deeper into things than a typical visit to an art exhibition would allow.

The formula for my programming has evolved over time, but the intimate small group format continues to engage. After ten years, YCC has a strong core of collectors and over 200 active members. We travel to art experiences, and gather at least 1-2x per month for educational programming and libations. These people are comfortable in most any art environment, not intimidated to ask questions, and many have found their voice as collectors and are buying art with confidence.

My collectors have made meaningful contributions to support emerging artists by supporting their Kickstarters, buying their work and their books, attending their performances, artist talks, and exhibitions...validating their talent and enjoying their success. Hey...it's a well known fact that I connect artists with collectors, other critical thinkers, and tastemakers. YCC members are revered guests at every art fundraiser for their generous support of local nonprofits and their shrewd purchases. We never miss a great party!

BG: *Where did collecting start for you?*

MS: I bought my first piece of artwork when I was in college, at Duke.

BG: *Do you still have it?*

MS: I still have it. It's upstairs. I didn't realize until much, much later, that it's by an artist I knew here in his later life, Gene Alcott. He grew up in Chapel Hill. When I bought the piece I didn't know him or anything about him. I met him in the late 80's, and we became fast friends. I have several works of his in my collection,

including one created specifically for me. I also loved his business card, a simple black and white card that said, “Gene Alcott, popular artist.” Say it and it’s so.

BG: *That’s wonderful! So, when you bought your first piece, did that start the collecting bug for you?*

MS: It wasn’t buying that got me started, it was going to the museums in DC, when I was growing up. Seeing the Philips Collection and the National Gallery. Seeing the Mona Lisa, and trying to figure out why that was so wonderful.

You know, my parents were not art enthusiasts. My father had a beautiful oil painting of a ship that was more traditional. My mother was very fashion oriented; her style was more about that than art in terms of her expression.



©Vivian Maier, Untitled, Image courtesy: Lumière and the John Maloof Collection
In fact, the Vivian Maier piece I have is a picture of a woman in a navy blue beautiful coat. It looks like it’s from the 1940’s. She’s with two young children at a museum in Chicago. I bought that photograph on the day my first granddaughter was born, for her.

It’s one of eight of the first color photographs released from the Vivian Maier work. It reminds me of my childhood. Not because my mother took me to museums but because she dressed me like the people in the picture and she dressed like the mother in the picture. Ironically, we were never in an art gallery together.

BG: *Your collection is clearly very eclectic. Is there a focus to your collection? Do you pursue something specific? Or is it just that something speaks to you?*

MS: There are a number of themes in the work I collect. I have always been drawn to colorful, naïve, simplistic work and have a strong collection of southern folk art and religious-themed work. Portraits, pop culture icons, and photography in general have always been a draw. Coming of age is a recurrent theme, as well as other depictions of the feminine, particularly the reclining female.

My favorite piece, hands down, is *Barbie's Dream*. It's been the center of my life since the day we drove down Peachtree Street with that painting propped in the back of our VW convertible. It's reminiscent of one of my favorite art quotes "Nothing says culture like a big-ass oil painting." We found the painting, by New York artist Gary Komarin, at Sandler Hudson Gallery shortly after we bought our home in Ansley Park, Atlanta.

Barbie's Dream ©Gary Komarin, photograph by Bill Yates

At the exhibition, the first piece I wanted was a pair of high-heeled shoes, up to the knee, in a swimming pool with a pink Cadillac parked next to the pool. It was already sold. *Barbie's Dream* is more traditionally inspired and speaks to an important theme in my art history journey. I have long been fascinated by images of the reclining female and this reference to Balthus' painting tied that all together for me. Since I rarely ever rest, just looking at people reclining is very helpful and soothing to me.

BG: *(Laughs) It lets you know that it 's possible.*

MS: Yes! And if you were to do so, this is how you could do it. I love those chaise lounges. I have postcards and bookmarks on all the pages of all the reclining females over time.

BG: *When did you start your own business and how does YCC fit into Mary Stanley Studio*

MS: After I retired from Nursing Administration at Egleston Hospital, I worked with an Atlanta sculptor, Martin Dawe, for seven years. I had commissioned Martin to do a sculpture for my home. I was impressed by his professionalism and his talent. I was intrigued by the challenges of selling art in Atlanta. There were a number of good galleries here but the "art economy" was not vibrant, and I was constantly aware of how few people had great art in their homes.

I was able to create strong marketing materials, write proposals, and manage projects for CherryLion Studios. These were skills that could be helpful to many artists, so I decided to represent a few artists under my own “studio.” From the start, I knew I did not want to have a bricks and mortar gallery, and that I didn’t want to limit my scope to Atlanta. After a couple of years of funding exhibitions here and in New York, I realized that it was going to be very tough to sell enough art to maintain a viable business. We needed collectors, and there just weren’t enough of them.

Young Collectors Club started as an effort to create a collector base in Atlanta – and beyond, and to involve young professionals in support of local nonprofit art organizations as their future philanthropists. Mary Stanley Studio has continued to evolve with independent curatorial work, art consultation, arts advocacy, and artist representation still as key components. But, YCC is a strong thread tying these efforts together while supporting the basic mission of developing and nurturing collectors.

The first photography show I curated was called *21 Under 30* and I advertised it in the Atlanta Celebrates Photography (ACP) guide. I couldn’t afford to fund an exhibition and pay for marketing too. So, for a hundred bucks, I advertised in the ACP Guide, got my marketing out there to a broad audience and could focus my energy on the curatorial role. With ACP’s marketing boost, the show was a great success. I sold photography, even sold to people I did not know, and I sold my first video.

I still work closely with ACP and with many of those first artists from *21 Under 30*. And it was such a successful rapport, from the very, very, very first start. Ansley West Rivers was one of the 2016 ACP *Ones to Watch*, Patrick Heagney was featured on the Georgia Fence, Stephanie Dowda won an Idea Capital grant, and Kevin Byrd is killing it at DOLBY in San Francisco. The joy of knowing and working with these talented artists is worth more than any sale I could ever make.

BG: When you started pursuing or working with photographic artists, did that light a fire for photography? Were you aware of it before then?

MS: I was very much aware of it. I was already involved in the art scene; I was on the board of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia (MOCA GA). I had started as an artist rep, and a collector, and then moved to curator, and then tried art consultant. I never dropped any of those hats along the way, I just kept putting another one on my head.

The Atlanta Celebrates Photography's *Ones To Watch* project has been one of my most successful efforts in photography curating. Amy Miller, ACP's executive director, invited me to curate a selection of ten emerging photographer to be featured at the ACP annual fundraiser. These were young artists who are still somewhat under the radar and affordable, but on a positive trajectory in their career. In 2016, we "christened" another ten, bringing the total to 80 collectible artists. I continue to work with many of them... Holly Andres, Bill Yates, Ansley Rivers West, Laura Noel, Nancy Floyd, Joshua Rashaad McFadden, Andrew Feiler, Tommy Kha, Meg Griffiths and many more.

BG: *You've formed a community within YCC, but what about the larger impact on the creative community in Atlanta?*

MS: Do you know the story of the history of the High Museum of Atlanta? It was started by a bunch of housewives of corporate executives who said, "If you think you're going to attract the best and the brightest to come and live in our city without having a strong cultural scene you're wrong. We need a museum, and we need a symphony. We need the arts".

I joined the Midtown Leadership Program, right after I left Egleston Hospital and first started with CherryLion Studios, to help build this Midtown neighborhood where I live. They changed the whole character from 14th Street, down to the Fox. I can walk across the street and go to one of the top ten museums in this country right now! I couldn't say that 30 years ago.

And MOCA was four doors down, and now it's looking for another bigger, better location and has 27 graduates of the Working Artists Project. One of which was Caomin Xie, one of the very first artists that I started my business with.

BG: *Oh, that's fantastic!*

MS: And I had a solo show for him in 2005!

So it's all about, a place to raise the family. I wanted my kids to live in a cultural community. I wanted to live in a city. That's why I moved to Atlanta. I thought I was moving to a city. Now, 30 years later, I feel like it finally is a city.

BG: *A city with a vibrant, dynamic arts culture.*

MS: A cultural city, yes! I feel very strongly about the fact that the Atlanta arts community has made a move. It's changed a lot in the time that I've lived here. It's made a really decisive move, in the past couple of years, with Artadia, The Working Artists Project Grant at MOCA, the work that ACP's been doing, the Idea Capital Grant. We've really been able to make a mark. And we've been able to keep some artists here, in this community.

BG: *What artists do you think people should be looking at now? Who are you excited about?*

I've put a lot of energy into stewarding Idea Capital, a grassroots nonprofit organization providing small, but important grants for local artists in a broad range of disciplines. I like that they are idea grants and not necessarily for fully formed projects. The artists presenting the work may not necessarily have a buffed, polished body of work but the ideas they have are so intriguing it's clear they have the capability of implementing them. Working with some of those artists is something that I'm drawn to right now.

I always have a group of young artists that I'm loving. Right now I'm loving a couple of mid-career artists, Jody Fausett and Sarah Hobbs and I'm hoping to do a project with them. I feel that both of them would benefit from some exposure beyond Atlanta and we are trying to make that happen.

I'm very excited about Holly Andres. I've loved her work for a really long time. I think that her commercial practice has informed her fine art practice in such a really intriguing way. She is certainly one of the artists that I am thrilled about.

First Blush ©Holly Andres

BG: *I agree. Holly's work is incredibly beautiful. She tells visual stories that I find intriguing, compelling and mysterious.*

MS: Yes. So, Jody Fausett, Sarah Hobbs and Holly Andres for sure. Those are three artists I have a personal mentoring commitment to and enthusiasm for working with right now.

Alarmist (Motel 6) 2013 ©Sarah Hobbs

Amanda Greene is another photographer who I work closely with. Her southern vernacular imagery has gained wide recognition from the Bitter Southerner to the NY Times.

Adam Forrester is an artist that I'm very intrigued by. His moving image and photography work is so unique, personal and inspiring to me. I can't wait to see what he will do next.

The Direction Albert Patterson Was Facing, 2013 (In The Valley); Collection of Jennifer and Scott Bates ©Adam Forrester

I saw some beautiful work at the PULSE Contemporary Art Fair. Rania Matar, a photographer from Lebanon, creates stunning portraits of young girls and mothers exploring delicate themes of culture and coming of age.

My daughter bought a Rachel Perry piece, from her Lost in My Life series, while we were at PULSE in Miami. Rachel is also an artist that I'm thrilled about.

And, Martine Gutierrez, who went to RISD. Martine is one of the most eloquent artists commenting on the conflicts and issues of gender and identity.





BG: *Oh, yes, I love that work. It's stunning and conceptually interesting.*

MS: This past year I have been involved in two major initiatives. I am working closely with photographer Bill Yates from Jacksonville, FL. I mounted a solo exhibition of photographs from his book, *Sweetheart Roller Skating Rink*, at Hathaway Contemporary Gallery in Atlanta. You helped me curate that show. I am representing him, working to sell his prints and promote his book, which you edited! His work resonates with a broad collector audience and is experiencing a huge popularity across the US and in Europe.

Untitled from *Sweetheart Roller Skating Rink* ©Bill Yates

I also curated a photography exhibition titled *Picturing Justice* with my colleague Louise Shaw for the Atlanta Legal Aid Society, featuring five documentary photographers. I have thoroughly enjoyed immersion in documentary work on social justice themes and will continue to investigate this avenue.

Other photographers that I'm obsessed with include William Eggleston, Doug Dubois, Jackie Nickerson, Maude Schuyler Clay, Andrew Feiler, Austin Merrill and Peter Dicampo, and Tony Gum. I was also introduced to some new talent thru curating and attending Atlanta Photography Group (APG) exhibitions that I am following. Stay tuned for the 2017 ACP Ones To Watch for more info on all that.

BG: *What do you feel is important for budding collectors to know when purchasing art work and beginning to build a collection?*

MS: Be clear on your objectives. Decide on the artist, and then buy the best piece of his/her work available... stretch your budget a tiny bit. It is better to buy one great work from an artist you love than to fill your walls with bargains and impulsive buys. Studied decisions usually trump impulse buys. Buy what you like, and want to live with. You will still love that piece when your SUV has died and your flat screen TV can't keep your attention!

www.marystanleystudio.com

www.youngcollectorsclubatl.com