

# A Lifelong Passion for Art

*William Lieberman's creative journey of starting over:*

Many art collectors, artists and dealers in Chicago know William Lieberman, director at Zolla/Lieberman Gallery, as an art dealer and passionate advocate for his artists. We found out only recently that he also has his own very personal passion for art collecting. Lieberman's unique story is one that involves many people, places, times, as well as setbacks. Through it all he maintained his curiosity and enthusiasm. - GV

If you have met Lieberman, you know he must have been a very energetic and curious child. He was interested in collecting from an early age because his father was in the plush toy business, providing him with the source of his earliest collecting passion. Eventually while living in Wrigleyville, he became obsessed with baseball cards.

In college Lieberman majored in ceramic art, and in 1980 he began to model for drawing and sculpture classes. Seeing an opportunity to collect work by the artists in the class, he traded his own modeling time for art, quickly amassing over 40 drawings and training his own eye by comparing others' techniques and interpretations.

By 1984 Lieberman was working at Zolla/Lieberman, his mother's gallery, maintaining his own studio in the East Ukrainian Village, and continuing to trade pottery and collect ceramics. Part of his year-end salary at the gallery was paid in art – the first piece he ever selected as his annual payment was by British sculptor David Nash.

On April 1, 1989, Lieberman moved his entire personal collection to the gallery. Two weeks later, tragically not quite a decade after starting his burgeoning collection, nearly everything in his collection was destroyed in the infamous 1989 River North fire. The devastation impacted many art world figures in the neighborhood. Some galleries closed for good. One artist lost his life's work. Lieberman still gets emotional talking about the fire today. He says he used the insurance money he received for his collection for a down payment on a small house in East Ukrainian Village, and he took his time rebuilding his collection from scratch with the new, painful, perspective of someone who'd previously lost a loved one.



Paintings by Su-en Wong and a collection of eleven ceramic bowls by Jay Strommen.

## Collectors' Colloquium 2012

We already accomplished our new year's resolution of forming a new art collectors group in Chicago! Together with Next Art Chicago, *Chicago Gallery News* is presenting an ongoing series about collecting art. The 6-session series began in late November, but 4 sessions take place in 2012, ending at the opening of Next Art Chicago at the Mart, April 26-29.

The series addresses topics of interest to anyone who is curious about the art world and would like expert knowledge about where to find art resources and how to think about collecting as a lifelong passion.

The group meets monthly in Chicago, but people outside of the city, or those who can't attend the physical sessions, can still partici-

pate online. Just make sure to travel to Chicago April 26-29 for Next Art Chicago!

### Upcoming dates and topics:

- **On the Block:** January 31, 6PM
- **Eye for Hire:** February 28, 6PM
- **Art as Investment:** March 27, 6PM
- **(Art) Fair Game:** April 27, 6PM

[Artchicago.com/information/collectors-colloquium/](http://Artchicago.com/information/collectors-colloquium/)



Lieberman's living room is ready for a visitor's discovery, and Lieberman tells each piece's story enthusiastically. Works visible, left to right: Stephen De Staebler, David Kroll, Deborah Butterfield, Josh Garber, Jin Soo Kim.

Setting out to create a new home, Lieberman knew he wanted a house that was appropriate for showing art. He managed to live in four different places during 15 months while the construction was being done, at one point, he says, living in the stacks at the gallery. Along with the house, Lieberman wanted to get his collection started again. Several artists generously traded or donated work to Lieberman to get things going. That generosity gave Lieberman the confidence to build a new collection so soon after losing his first, and it's that spirit that touches Lieberman most today, over 22 years later.

Lieberman's entire home is an artful surprise, and around every corner you find art: in the living room - Deborah Butterfield, Harris Deller, Stephen De Staebler, Josh Garber, Jin Soo Kim, David Kroll and Michelle Stewart. In the hallway: John Buck, Martin Puryear and Buzz Spector. Lieberman's own pottery may be found in his bedroom, and creative installations are placed all over the house – Lieberman says he likes to keep everything appropriate for art, but he leaves room to be daring and to have fun. There is a mural painted on the ceiling, and a twisting light installation by Glenn Wexler has been placed inside and above the kitchen cabinets. The downstairs bathroom, an ode to Zolla/Lieberman Gallery artists, is done in the style of a red brick, graffitied building, featuring names of artists who have come and gone from the gallery spray painted on the wall.

Lieberman says he would rather buy art than appliances and furniture, so the periodic addition of new art work tends to be his own kind of home improvement, and he regularly likes to rearrange works throughout the house to create a new point of view.

Leading me through the house like I was taking a Saturday morning gallery tour, Lieberman put me on the spot a few times to ask which piece in his collection was my favorite, and which was my least favorite. My answers kept changing, but the challenge to choose between the many works made me remember the lively personality of the collection, and the collector, long after I'd left.