

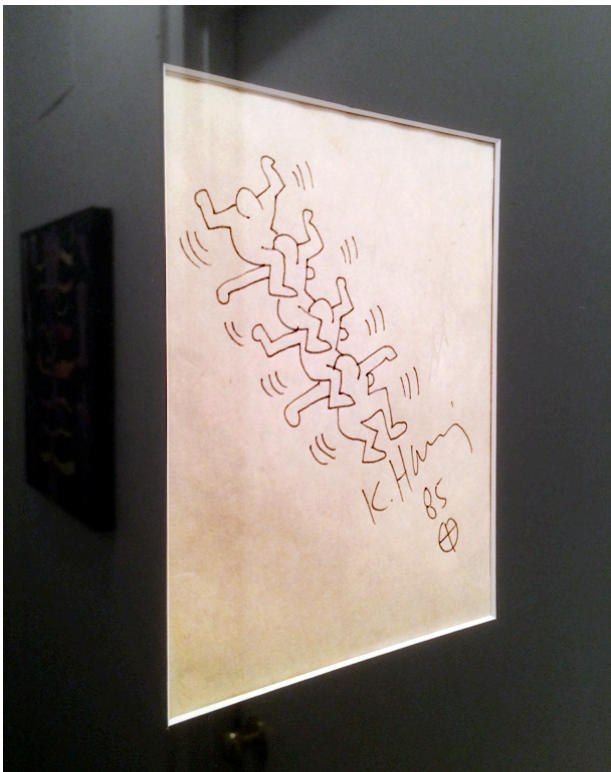
“Living with Art: The Nicky Enright Accumulation”

By Nicky Enright, originally published in *The Agora Culture*, 2015

(<https://theagoraculture.com/living-with-art-the-nicky-enright-accumulation>)

I am an artist, and I've never been asked to talk about my art collection before. I don't really consider my chance assortment of works of art, photographs, other objects and musical instruments a bonafide *collection*. It is more a sampling of things that have asserted themselves onto my shelves and walls – let's call it an “accumulation.” And I am limiting myself to talking about what is currently on display, as there's a big difference between what one actually lives with, versus what one stores.

The most expensive piece in my accumulation is an original Keith Haring drawing that he made right in front of me and gave to me in 1985. I was an art student at LaGuardia High School for Music and the Arts (“the Fame school”), and he was a visiting artist. His visit marks one of the few truly memorable days of high school, and after school some of us hung out with him, talking and making drawings together. I was impressed with his energy, how down to earth he was, and by how fearlessly and quickly he approached his drawings. I'd suspected that I had just met an artistic genius and resolved to keep his drawing forever. He was going on 27 years old, just 5 years before his death. Years later, when I learned how to make my own frames, I lovingly made a large frame for his small piece, and it's still in it. It's the most valuable piece not just speaking monetarily, but also because of what it represents. I consider it a daily reminder of a great artist, an important era in art, a moment we shared and of the impact that an artist can have on youth, even in a single day.



Keith Haring, *untitled*, 1985

At the opposite end of the spectrum, I have a small painting that I found in a dumpster outside what was then the graduate art building of Hunter College, on West 41st Street and 10th Avenue, while I was earning my MFA. It was unsigned and presumably unfinished or unsatisfactory, but I rescued it and have cared for it since. Not all that doesn't glitter is not gold! This piece, with its metallic sheen, glitters so fabulously that it's impossible to capture in a photograph.



Untitled, unsigned, circa 2007

Another piece I own but know little about is this Haitian painting by an artist who goes solely by the name Leonard. I love it for its straightforwardness and its compositional use of anatomy and pattern. I got it from my mother years after she received it as a gift from my Aunt Mary, returning from a trip to Haiti around 1975. So it has made it onto the walls of every home I have lived in for as long as I can remember.



Leonard, *untitled*, c. 1975

Then there's this little Jenny Holzer print on wood, which I love for its beautiful simplicity, calm clarity and political message. Many artists consider this type of work "didactic," meaning that its intention is too clear, but I say, at least sometimes, the clearer the better.



Jenny Holzer, *Raise Boys And Girls The Same Way*, from Truism series, 1984

While earning a BFA at The Cooper Union, I begged my fellow art student and friend Lisa Hamilton to trade this painting with me, and she finally relented. I'm not sure why it spoke to me so much, but it must have something to do with the fact that while growing up in Brooklyn, kids called me "zebra" because I had a Black mother and a White father. I thought these kids were as ridiculous as zebras were beautiful. And, as Lisa's painting clearly shows, zebras are actually *red* and white!



Lisa Hamilton, *Don't Judge a Horse by the Difference of its Color (detail)*, c. 1995

Lisa had been reluctant to let go of her work because she was attached to it. Along these lines, I recently had a heated discussion with fellow artists at a dinner party about living with one's own work. Who knew this was controversial? Some artists assert that they could never live with their own work for various reasons, while others find it completely natural to do so. I'm in the latter camp. Still, it is an interesting question that I look forward to investigating further.

I should mention that I am a post-studio artist, meaning I work at home, in public, or site-specifically, but most of my life I have had a studio; this is relevant because I know it makes a huge difference if one's studio is one's home. Artists obviously “live with” their own (current) work, in their studios at least, but I also find it fascinating to live with old work because, for all practical purposes, a different self created it. And I like to find the threads that exist through time and space.

An artist's concerns tend to be consistent, even as the work changes in maturity, perspective, medium, context and/or scale, and even as both the artist and his world change. The deep stuff in the art is, accordingly, deeply embedded. So artists are like archeologists at their own dig. We search -- to get closer to our own truth, to find (make) a better example of it, to get to the bottom of it. For example, I am always interested in enlarging my perspective into space, and imagining the universe.



Nicky Enright, *Cosmosis*, 2004

Cosmosis, a 3' x 6' painting that hangs in my living room, started out as a fun experiment in my studio, just a one-off. But it informed the skies in my NYC subway proposals that then became permanent installations commissioned by the New York City MTA Art & Design (previously “Arts for Transit”) a few years later.



Nicky Enright, *Universal City (1 of 4 installations)*, 2006, photo: Jeffrey Sturges

A few years after that and because of these works, I was invited to participate in the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C. The 8' x 8' painting I created during this festival, as an official NASA space artist, now hangs in the Smithsonian Folklife Festival offices.



Nicky Enright, *Interspace*, 2008

Although not emblematic of my work as a whole, these works share some representative characteristics such as a collage aesthetic (combining disparate elements), a fragmentation of reality, a preoccupation with globes, an attempt at expanding perspectives, skewing expectations and a balancing of control and spontaneity. To make a realization like this is what is interesting about living with my old art. My students call these *epiphs* (epiphanies). Whether in the studio or at home artists are interested in *epiphs* because they clarify one's understanding of one's own work and direction; the work itself can act as a guide. Art is mysterious, tapping into forces larger than rational intelligence. Old work can be like finding an ancient seed in the soil of your dig, and having the chance to water it to discover what will grow.

Speaking of ancient artifacts, this pre-Columbian metal *Tumi*, a ceremonial blade, hails from an actual archeological dig in Ecuador, where I was born. It lives on a shelf next to other artifacts. It is pre-Inca, therefore at least 600 years old, making it by far the oldest object in my home. I like to think of it as belonging to the good-old days in Ecuador, before American imperialism, Spanish rule and even Inca rule.



Tumi (ceremonial knife), Pre-Columbian, maybe Chimú, Ecuador, c. 14th century

Because of my strong interest in early- and pre-history, I have studied ancient Egypt, the birthplace of Western civilization, and I own this yellow limestone statue, a Metropolitan Museum replica of a figure from Egypt's Middle Kingdom. And my populist nature is pleased that the statue is simply a cloaked man, rather than a pharaoh or a god. This is why my MTA skyline is not the famous one from downtown Manhattan, but rather some ordinary residential buildings like the one I live in.



Ancient Egyptian, *Statue of a Cloaked Man*, c. 1850 B.C., Metropolitan Museum

Changing gears, I love music and the musical instruments that enable it almost as much as I love art. And I love these things aesthetically, not just as functional objects. I have a conga and a quinto, flutes, guitars and bass, bongos, a lot of DJ equipment, keyboards and a variety of percussion instruments. I consider them all to be a part of my accumulation as well -- like this guitar, which has become a sticker magnet.



Yamaha Acoustic Guitar with stickers



Percussion Instruments



Mandolin

As a musician and DJ, I also accumulate music from around the world, and this collection (bonafide) of CDs and vinyls also takes on an aesthetic dimension. Witness a wall turned geometric abstraction of colorful slivers – a grid of sound.



CD Accumulation

I love to combine all things audio with all things visual, so among my favorite living artists is Christian Marclay, a master of just that. He is the creator of *The Clock* which kept MoMA open for 24 hours on New Year's 2012, and I have been following his work for a long time. I had the pleasure of being the DJ for a New York Foundation of the Arts event in 2012 where he was inducted into the NYFA Hall of Fame. He was an early manipulator of vinyl records, experimenting with them as a medium, so it was a great honor to show him the Pioneer digital decks I was using, the state-of-the-DJ-art today. I own his piece *Shuffle*, a large deck of cards with photographs and musical notes on them, meant to enable the creation of infinite chance scores for musicians.



Christian Marclay, *Shuffle*, 2007

SHUFFLE

This deck of cards can be used as a musical score.

Shuffle the deck and draw your cards.

Create a sequence using as many or as few of the cards as you wish.

Play alone or with others.

Invent your own rules.

Sounds may be generated or simply imagined.

Christian Marclay, *Shuffle*, 2007

My most recent acquisition is *Sugar Hill Smiles* by Nari Ward (purchased with funds allocated from my “Wine Fund,” since I don’t have an “Acquisitions Fund”). I consider Nari a great artist, a friend, and sometimes mentor. But the reason I purchased this piece, created for an exhibition organized by No Longer Empty, is that it makes me smile while conjuring notions of the canned smile and of Piero Manzoni’s canning experiments.



Nari Ward, *Sugar Hill Smiles*, 2014

And on that pickled note, I close by saying how thankful I am for the opportunity to reflect on what I live with and why. So it is fitting to end with one of my favorite artworks of all time: *Thanks*, by Allan McCollum. I love that this piece turns the intangible into the tangible – the phrase “thank you” becomes an object one can actually hand to another. I have given many of these out over the years, and I live with three of them. In different rooms with different purposes, they all prompt me to feel grateful and give thanks. This one has a replica of an Egyptian mummy’s terracotta coffin on top -- a personal reminder to be thankful for my ancestors and for all those that came before me who made my life possible. In this way, it seems very related to the imagery in the Keith Haring artwork with which I began.



Allan McCollum, *Thanks (Visible Markers)*, 2002

I thank you for your curiosity and I wish you a large acquisitions fund for your own aesthetic accumulations.

--