

**collectorspace  
presents:**

# **Eisenberg Collection**

collectorspace  
presents:

*Criminal  
Stickup in  
Yellow*

*Ella Kruglyanskaya*

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# Foreword

Haro Cumbusyan

After exhibiting an installation, a video, and a performance piece in our first three presentations of reference-worthy private collections, we felt that it was time to bring a painting to collectorspace, and set out to search for the appropriate collector. When, through the kind introduction by our Advisory Board member Mari Spirito, I got to visit Rebecca and Marty Eisenberg's home in Scarsdale, NY, I knew that we had found what we were looking for. Every available spot on every wall in the house was covered with a painting—and not just any painting, but by some of the most significant painters of the last quarter century: Althoff, Doig, Dumas, Eisenman, Grotjahn, and many more. That created one major challenge for us: choosing one single artwork among so many masterpieces to present in our exhibition in Istanbul. Marty brilliantly solved our dilemma: "Here, you take my last invoice!" He was referring to a large, loud painting by a young artist, Ella Kruglyanskaya, who just had her first gallery solo show in New York. We immediately realized that it was the perfect pick because it accurately exemplified the Eisenbergs' long-standing (and very successful) collecting practice of acquiring masterpieces—through their trusted relationships with select gallerists—long before their masters became widely recognized as such.

I possibly ended up spending more time looking at Kruglyanskaya's

*Criminal Stickup in Yellow* (2012) than at any other painting in my life as it hung on the wall of our exhibition space, completely overwhelming the room with its size, color, and attitude. To my surprise, this single canvas provided enough material to stare at, wonder about, and to speculate on for the duration of those six weeks of the show. The uncanny ability of this painting to captivate its viewer hopefully comes through in this publication as Rosa Lleó provides a close reading of the work, followed by Nazlı Gürlek's essay on its connection with the street that it overlooked while at collectorspace. Orit Gat has the unenviable job of presenting a critical review of a private collection, but with the Eisenbergs as a subject, that arduous task turns into a pleasant read. The full transcript of the collectors' always honest, insightful, and entertaining answers to our video interview questions is the final text.

I'd like to thank all the contributors to this publication. It was a privilege to be one of the first venues outside of New York to show Ella Kruglyanskaya's work, and I'd like to thank her gallery Gavin Brown's enterprise for facilitating this—especially since we received the work before it was shipped to the collectors. And of course, I'd like to express my gratitude to Rebecca and Marty for their generosity—I greatly appreciate their participation in our program, their openness with their collection in general, and their long-running patronage of art institutions, galleries, and artists.

# On the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown

Rosa Lleó

"I am sick of being good," whispers Pepa, the main character on Pedro Almodóvar's *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), while she throws a whole package of sleeping pills into her gazpacho. The hot color palette, dominated by the red of the uniquely Spanish dish, accentuates the fast-paced events of the scene. Pepa is a professional and successful thirtysomething woman who lives in a stunning—and kitsch—penthouse in the centre of Madrid. Her lover, Ivan, is a one-dimensional, almost cartoonish character that constantly cheats on her with the most quirky types: his first wife, an old lady who still dresses like a sixties baby doll, and his current lover, a feminist lawyer. The three women spend the whole film shooting each other furious looks—always in their impeccable and colorful clothes—and treating their male counterparts with utter contempt.

The second period of Almodóvar films (from the eighties onwards)

corresponds to a very specific period in the history of Spain. His films from this period leave behind the manifestations of revolt and celebration of the earlier years, but still mirror the schizophrenia that characterized a country that did not yet know what democracy meant. A period in which the dictatorial infrastructures were still very present, and Catholicism and its traditions had to co-exist together with new values and representations, especially in big cities like Madrid. Almodóvar's characters have an indefatigable and incorrigible energy and power. His women scream and talk about sex all the time, not in the way pseudo-feminist consumer culture is doing now—which does nothing but reinforce gender stereotypes—but by being really sincere and shameless.

From the moment I first encountered *Criminal Stickup in Yellow* (2012) I could feel the same strength and joy, passion and vitality that characterized the vibe from that period. It is the same energy that characterizes one of the best films from the Spanish director. Ella Kruglyanskaya's work depicts a close-up of two feminine figures that seem to be caught in the middle of an argument. What they could argue about is not really important; it just depicts a moment of emotional outburst.

The figures are an amalgam of female archetypes, from a

Paleolithic fertility goddess to a 1950s pinup girl, heightened by a skilful brushwork and an intensely colored palette. The set is deliberately artificial (yellow) and human emotions are treated in an abstract, almost synthetic manner. The two women are beautiful, a beauty that relates again to Almodóvar's female figures, even if they have cubist faces like his fetish actress Rossi de Palma, or even if they could be considered too fat by certain standards, or older than the teenage pop stars of today. Those two curved and exuberant women are very far from what is depicted in fashion advertising, and yet they create exquisite shapes reminiscent of the most important figures of the history of painting. Take, for example, a different series of works from the artist, such as *Reading Bather* or *Moustache Beach* (2013), in which the feminine figure is laying down reading in a summery setting. They are depicted in a similar pose to that of the traditional odalisque, but they sit with their swimming costumes not interested at all in the male's gaze. Winking at one of the most traditional genres, Kruglyanskaya's bathers do not sit at any harem nor are objects of desire; they are empowered in their own bodies and their own colorful costumes.

## *The two women*

A pair is the perfect formula to create dramatic tension. We are in front of two women but also of two different conflicting parts of the self, reinforced by the two faces pictured in the dresses. They look at each other: same hair, same size, same type of dress, somehow representing two sides of the same person, two juxtaposed expressions that are against each other's personality. The scared and shy faces the outgoing and loud. There is something that vaguely refers to the masks of the *Comedia dell'arte*. They usually represent social types, each character embodying a mood: mockery, sadness, gaiety or confusion, with an aesthetic of exaggeration, distortion and anti-humanism. We tend to see the body as vulnerable: war photography marks the body as victim; pornography depicts it as merely usable. Perhaps, in opposition to this, Kruglyanskaya has sought to imbue her figures with monumentality. Equally, their voluptuous bodies are somehow too big for them, as are their hands, which stand like expressionist strokes.

Related to its frantic expression, what is also consistent about this painting is its humour. The scene depicted could have a crazy development, or it could not—it is not important. But it is certain that the scene will have some comical nuance. A parallel could

be drawn with the absurdities of many Hollywood screwball comedies of the 1930s and 1940s, such as Howard Hawks's *Bringing Up Baby* (1938). Here, an apparently distracted but impeccably dressed Katharine Hepburn messes around with a baby leopard and a secondary and bland Cary Grant. But although the two girls in the painting have a cartoonish face that could relegate them to the role of women in the fifties, they step closer to the femme fatale than to the pretty girls with angelical faces who characterized the films from that time.

## *The yellow*

It is known that red can act as a tool in melodrama. Going back to Almodóvar, he would employ primary warm colors in his scenography to emphasize the dramatic situations. But what can be said about yellow? Comic strips use yellow as a primary color and it is easy to combine with red and blue. Roy Lichtenstein used it in the work *Yellow Stroke* in 1966, which parodied the broad brushwork of Abstract Expressionism. It is also employed in many of his works as a background, like in the case of *Head* (1962) or *Kiss V* (1964). In *Criminal Stickup*, yellow makes the scene neutral, as if a spotlight had been placed deliberately in front of the two girls, making their dresses and their shadows more visible and more shining, and emphasizing this

irresistible moment of explosion.

The yellow background also makes the work deliberately flat. But its flatness is as expressive as it can be, turning the concept of flatness into something extremely dynamic. There is no specific scenario that could contextualise the two women. There is no connection with reality. Even the shades are not hidden, they are clearly marked with a black spot that seems to be saying, "This is how a shadow is supposed to work," and it does. The dresses of the two women are similar, colorful and with specific details such as an elbow patch or the fishnet stockings that somehow match the background, their hair, their bags, and the overall scene. The painting denotes a certain interest in fashion, but it is merely formal—a series of patterns in order to match the required palette. Those irresistible ornaments that tackle the whole painting are an exercise of detail; they go beyond any specific style or decade classification. It remembers what Almodóvar used to say when asked about a possible contradiction between his liberated women and their obsession with the clothes they used: "A woman must be free, even at the moment she wants to choose her outfit."

## *And the criminal*

In this painting, as in Kruglyanskaya's entire oeuvre, there are no men at all. And if there

are, they are in the periphery, just shadows. Her men appear always as something like a statue or a contour, flat, depicted with a single color, which exacerbates the complexity of the female characters. Here we distinguish a third character hidden in the back of the girls, appearing as a black shade over the yellow background. His silhouette follows the woman's, bent on the side and easily identified with the depiction of the criminal in detective comic stories such as Dick Tracy. The hat, the trench coat and the gun work as the absurd and comical representation of the male figure that is doing a double-sided joke gesture. The painting is a play with representation. What is it that we are seeing? Is it a man or a shadow, a pistol or a penis? There is a beautiful period in Magritte's oeuvre, "La Periode Vache" in which he revolts against the Surrealist canon and decides to create freer and less elitist works, defending his Belgian origins against the French. His strokes are harsher; leaning towards impressionism even though the absurd and conceptual take on the works is still present. There is a rupture of the categorical borders between high and low culture, the parody, and the absence of the so-called "big narratives" or historicism. *L'Ellipse* (1948) depicts a green-faced cartoonish character with a shotgun growing from his nose. *Criminal Stickup in Yellow* has

something of this surrealist joke that implies sexual desire, but the man becomes totally overshadowed by the two women.

The women, the yellow and the criminal, in this precise order, this distinctive universe of femininity, color and humour will appear in all Kruglyanskaya's paintings, and always with exuberance. Here an exuberance of color, size and expression that attracts you slowly, first by its energy and then when each of its details are revealed. But there is a last point about Kruglyanskaya's work in where her strength and originality reside, and that is its timelessness. The references used in this text travel around the twentieth century freely, from the post-dictatorial Spain to the American fifties and from Surrealism to Pop Art. But the work is utterly contemporary. And that is what makes it so unique in the language of painting, where everything can easily fall into the imitation and the pastiche. There are no canons or styles to follow; a feminine nervous breakdown is enough to start the episode.

# Stickup in Taksim

Nazlı Gürlek

In an article that I read on the works of Ella Kruglyanskaya, the author mentions that the artist's paintings are closely related to the phrase "to throw a shade," which could be translated into Turkish as "to cast a shadow," meaning something completely different.<sup>1</sup> According to this article, the phrase is borrowed from the drag scene in New York in the 1980s. Drag queens used this phrase to show disdain and scorn for each other—just like here: "I don't tell you you're ugly, but I don't have to tell you because you *know* you're ugly." Until I saw this article, I did not realize that a "shadow" in a painting could be used as an essential detail that could open up new readings through class, race, and sexuality. Then, what would this reading tell us about the life of this painting in Istanbul?

*Criminal Stickup in Yellow*, painted in the brightest hues of yellow, red, blue, orange, and green, depicts two young women—with

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<sup>1</sup> Laura McLean-Ferris, "Ella Kruglyanskaya," *frieze*, Issue 156, June–August 2013, accessed March 2, 2014, <https://www.frieze.com/issue/review/ella-kruglyanskaya>.

the same bob haircut, distinguished from each other through their hair color. The two women, one blond, one brunette, stand in front of a solid yellow background, covering up their voluptuous bodies only barely with mini dresses that give the impression that they are not from an expensive fashion house but are rather from a street fashion brand. They appear to be caricaturized by a third person who is secretly watching them in a moment of unpleasant discussion. The blond woman is a step ahead of the other one, her mouth twisted in anger. She directs a threatening look over her shoulder at her friend, while the other one is obviously caught off-guard by this storm of feminine anger, eyes wide open and her mouth in a circle of surprise, just looking at her friend. In the foreground is the small, midnight blue handbag of the young woman who is the "victim," the bag that is just hanging from her hand, dangling, motionless, and passive, almost paralyzed with fear. The image of this object implies the absence of the other woman's bag, and suggests that the latter might be the hostess. On the background, between the two women, is the shadow of a pitch-black, sharp object. The gun that emerges from the angry woman's body towards the other one is nothing more than the projection of the index finger, extended threateningly. It is precisely this

“shadow gun” that adds a fatal seriousness to the painting on a psychological dimension.

What kind of a web of crime that we are in is a subject of curiosity. From the pantyhose, we can deduce that the season is winter; as they are not wearing their coats, the situation is taking place indoors. However, the data that would reveal in which city or neighborhood or space this story is taking place is not present. Actually, the painting focuses on the women’s state of mind and the relational ground between them, rather than the context that they are in. The stickup, mentioned in the title, takes place in the shadow, emphasizing that the real impact of the painting is aimed at us on a psychological level. In this sense, the patterns of huge faces that cover the mini dresses are striking; by mimicking the women’s expression, they both emphasize and objectify their states of mind.

The women’s breasts coincide with the eyes of the face on the dress and their pubic hair coincide with the beards, which seem to say that the conflict stems from sex. Their sexuality being reflected on their clothes emphasize the social dimension of the issue. It appears that the relationship of women with other women equipped with sexuality contains a series of violently charged dynamics. Furthermore, there is a thin moustache added to the angry face and this face

resembles more a man with make-up on rather than a woman, indicating the sexuality here could be outside of conventional patterns. Then, what could we think about the Istanbul life of this fight between women with moustaches and men with make-up?

Those traditionalists among us believe that the art of painting exists only on a symbolic plane and that its meaning is derived from the balance of the composition, the reality of the story it depicts, or the harmony of colors. However, we know that today, painting finds its real meaning and value within its relationship to historic, natural, economic, social, and political conditions. Yet, we are not so naïve as to defend that a painting’s value and meaning is timeless or autonomous; on the contrary, we know that the meaning of painting is determined within the relationship that it builds between the “internal” dynamics—the content and the form—with “external” dynamics—the context it exists in. In addition, all of these are related to an issue of “visibility.” Right here, what comes to mind is what the intellectual possibilities of asking questions about the relationship between the viewer and Kruglyanskaya’s painting in collectorspace are.

collectorspace is located right next to the Gezi Pastanesi [Gezi Pastry Shop] in Taksim Square. It is at the top of the inclined road to

the square from Gümüşsuyu. Right in front, the shuttles to Teşvikiye line up. Which means that, all of the art works placed in the space that is visible from the street with an all-glass, floor to ceiling window, is seen by those who choose to go to the square from the Gümüşsuyu side, those who approach the pastry shop from this side, as well as the drivers and passengers of the shuttles. This relatively direct relationship between the work and the street is quite different from the windowless, enclosed by four-walls relationship that is not linked to the street. Such a relationship charges the work with both vulnerability and a form of challenging. In this space that opens to the street through the glass, Kruglyanskaya's voluptuous women are acting for the viewers. The painting puts on an exaggerated voyeurism and exhibitionism. This content is combined with the architectural features of the space and the work's physical positioning, theatrically contextualizing the relationship between the painting and the viewer.

Behind the space with the glass façade where the work is exhibited, there is a second, smaller space, which is used as an office. It hosts a desk, a library, as well as a documentary video interview, on loop, on the collector that the work belongs to, which evokes a backstage where the work opens up to the viewer. This area, on the one hand, has

on record the life of the collectors' home and gives us an idea of the painting's history of ownership. In a more general sense, through the specifics of this painting, it offers a look into the historic, class-based, and commercial sides of art collecting that has been established in the second half of the 20th century. This play, which is staged without the need for a ticket nor an invitation, is transformed into a web of intricate questions through the meanings and associations that it is charged with through the relationship between the painting and Taksim Square—a stop on its international circulation within the system of art.

At collectorspace with its glass façade—in the middle of Istanbul, diagonal to the Gezi Park, it seems most crucial to ask the question of "what kind of art." This article, penned close to the first anniversary of the Gezi resistance, brings up an array of questions that are closely related to the specific history of the location, which I cannot help but think about: Where does the object of painting meet the questions on its relationship to historic, class-based and commercial issues, the demands of the street? Where does this painting, which is both a humorous and direct representation of class, race, and sexuality, approach the language of the street, and where does it separate from it? Where and how does the voyeuristic and exhibitionist visuality

that transforms the staged play into a clearly legible, simple anecdote, situate the viewer? The "shadow" that triggers the ultimate meaning of painting and that alters it on a psychic level to a crime story, adds new "shadows" to this square's series of multi-layered meanings. The souls that fill the square, visible and invisible, propose new possibilities of relationships that could be established with the viewers.

# Door Wide Open

Orit Gat

An image shows a twin bed under a shelf full of stuffed animals. Above the shelf are two Peter Doig paintings. This photograph, of a child's bedroom, is on the cover of the catalogue of "At Home/Not At Home," the only exhibition to date of a substantial group of works from Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg's collection, which was shown at the CCS Bard Hessel Museum in Upstate New York in 2010. Following it is a suite of images from the Eisenberg home in Westchester County, New York. The bedrooms, kitchen, library, and den are all full of exemplary pieces of contemporary art hanging on every available wall space. The back cover of the book shows a porch complete with outdoor furniture and a yellow Martin Creed neon work that reads, "Don't worry."

Welcome to the Eisenberg home, where there is a Rirkrit Tiravanija sculpture of a plateful of pad thai on the kitchen table, a large Chris Ofili leaning against the living room wall, and a tiny B. Wurtz sculpture on the dresser in the guest bedroom. When I visited the Eisenbergs' New York apartment, I was instructed to wander around the apartment

and see the art. "If the door is open, feel free to look in," was the only rule. Such is the presentation of this collection. When I asked Martin Eisenberg if he'd ever consider exhibiting his collection again, he was uncertain. Maybe in another twenty-five years, he said. (The CCS exhibition celebrated the Eisenbergs' twenty-fifth anniversary, standing for twenty-five years of shared collecting.) But the collection is visible, as long as any visitor to their home takes a walk through the place.

The Eisenbergs make it hard not to discuss domesticity when describing the collection. Theirs is an extreme experiment in living with art on a daily basis. And day-to-day life is what defines these works. Viewing contemporary art, we have grown accustomed to associating large pieces on empty white walls or cement floors with value, but at the Eisenberg home, such sparse presentation has been done away with and the works vie for the visitor's attention. Somehow it doesn't seem like a competition. Instead, it's hard to make eye contact when chatting in the living room because your eye is constantly wandering off to focus on this or that work. Rachel Harrison's sculpture *Cindy* (2004) is brought to life by the light coming in through the windows; the earthy tones of David Hammons's speakers covered by bottlecaps (*Speakers*, 1986) echo with the

natural materials of the midcentury modern furniture in the living room; and above it looms large a colorful geometric piece by Mark Grotjahn.

We don't often think of contemporary art in over-the-couch terms. So much of the progress that contemporary art has made has tested the boundaries of the white walls and the pedestal. We think of time-based media and large-scale installations as works that were created, even destined, to go into institutions. The Eisenberg collection challenges these assumptions. It takes some humor to place the aforementioned Tiravanija on the kitchen table. It also takes some vision for a collector to own both Tiravanija's *Untitled 1993 (Shall We Dance)*, which includes a turntable continually playing a song for gallerygoers to dance to, while insisting on also having a multiple, a more "collectible" piece to live with.

Eisenberg discovered Tiravanija at Gavin Brown's enterprise in New York. "Back then," Martin Eisenberg says to me, "it wasn't hard buying every show Gavin did." He goes on to count some of the artists Brown was working with when the Eisenbergs first started following his program—"Elizabeth Peyton, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Peter Doig, Chris Ofili, Laura Owens. I'm missing a lot of people, but I can just stop there." In the case of the Eisenbergs, it takes a gallerist to make a collection. The Eisenbergs did not "discover"



unknown artists. Instead, they discovered galleries. In the mid 1990s, when the Eisenbergs met dealers like Brown, Anton Kern, Carol Greene, and Andrew Kreps, they bought into their programs consistently, making them not only prescient collectors but also important players in the development of the commercial art scene in New York City.

Eisenberg sees a connection between these gallerists. "They all have a similar sensibility." One that he relates to. And that sensibility has to do with production and value: the vast majority of the works in the collection are hand crafted, a term that Eisenberg uses time and again to describe the work he is interested in. This doesn't mean that the work is not conceptually oriented—but at a time when the highly polished, mass produced works of artists like Jeff Koons rose to prominence, the Eisenbergs based their collection on hands-on practices rather than large-scale productions. Eisenberg claims that the backbone of the collection is the work of David Hammons, Richard Tuttle, and Mary Heilmann, whom he refers to as the "elder statesmen of the collection." And as the collection develops, one artist's work leads to another's. While the work of these three artists does provide a perfect example of the kind of handmade, object-oriented approach the

Eisenbergs are interested in, it also creates a new point of reference for a large number of artists that the Eisenbergs collect, who rigorously reconsider objecthood in their practice—artists like Creed and Harrison, as well as Gedi Sibony, Marlo Pascual, and Anne Collier.

The fact that the Eisenbergs collect single artists in depth, beginning at the start of their career and up to the point where those artists have developed a substantial market, combined with their interest in being part of their local art scene, makes the collection coherent, of course, but it also makes it into a reflection of a certain mode of production in a certain time and place in New York City, in a way it couldn't have been had they simply bought a single piece here and there rather than attentively following the programs of particular galleries. The Eisenberg collection is assembled mainly through purchases from New York galleries and they assess that 90 percent of the artists represented in it are—or were at a certain point—New York-based. The large majority of the artists in the collection were young when the Eisenbergs first became interested in their work, and their commitment to them grows with those artists' careers. Recently, however, they added a Sam Gilliam: "We went back in time and bought it. He's undervalued and so I think he's emerging." Having Gilliam or

Jack Whitten, who they now collect as well, means that they're building context for the younger painters in the collection, too. "Everything affects everything else," Eisenberg says. And he is convinced that he came into everything just at the right time, that this is the great era of art. He ties this both to the widespread participation of women in the arts—as artists, dealers, curators, museum directors—since one cannot call any period in which 50 percent of the population did not participate a great era, but also to the fact that art just "keeps getting better and better"—the longer the history of art is, and the more we study it, the more artists have to draw on and riff off, he claims enthusiastically.

The display of the collection in the Eisenberg home does not necessarily reflect any one idea of the trajectory of art history. Even though the collection itself is developing mainly chronologically, with the artist's careers and the constant addition of new, younger artists, the presentation in the apartment follows more freeform tendencies, from the mundane (there's too much light in the living room to hang photography) to the personal (though Eisenberg insisted not to play favorites when I asked). It promotes a reassessment of what counts is ideal conditions for the presentation of artworks, and it does so with a wink and a smile

(the pad thai plate in the kitchen is clearly a telling example).

Another thing about the over-the-couch standard that contemporary art challenges is the deep rift between a private and a public collection. While artists and dealers are still interested in placing works in museum collections, the fact that many artworks are sold as part of editions, multiples, and versions means that one work can live in a number of different context. And the Eisenbergs' home is a very particular space: not public per se, but not totally private, as the Eisenbergs host many museum groups, artists, curators, and so on, so the open door policy is extended to many a visitor. And unlike a public institution, the consistency of the collection means that the works are always presented alongside those of other artists whose practices complement, challenge, and historicize them. Few collecting institutions could claim this about their acquisitions in any kind of consistent manner. The Eisenberg collection remains intact in the context in which it was created: as a sign of our time.

# Conversation with Rebecca and Martin Eisenberg

collectorspace: Could you talk about how you started collecting?

Martin Eisenberg: I would always draw and paint as a young child, and I took studio classes when I was in college. I continued with them after college, too, at local art centers. When I opened up a small retail business up in Danbury, Connecticut, I would go to the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield. It was there that I met Aldrich, who at the time was probably well into his eighties. He was showing artists like Julian Schnabel, Francesco Clemente, Sandro Chia, and Georg Baselitz—all the great Neo-Expressionists of the day. I asked him where I could go and see this work in New York. He listed a couple of galleries, one of which was Sperone Westwater.

I went down to the gallery and met Angela Westwater. I asked if she had any works by an artist by the name of Sandro Chia, and she told me that she had just got a new piece, a large-scale etching. And she took out this magnificent piece—it must have been four to five feet tall. It was gorgeous. Good example of the work. And I said to her, well, how much is it? She said, six. I had no idea what six was. It could have been six hundred thousand or sixty

thousand. After all, I had seen a show at the Guggenheim Museum on new Italian paintings, so he was being shown in major museums. I said, well, six what? She looked at me and said, six hundred dollars. I was so shocked that I could afford this thing that I ran back to twenty-second street where I was sharing an apartment with my brother. I grabbed my checkbook, ran down, wrote her a check for six hundred dollars, and the rest is history.

CS: How did Chia's work lead you to build an art collection? Were you thinking of becoming a collector when you bought that piece?

ME: I enjoyed that piece so much, and I wanted to get a second piece by another Italian artist, Francesco Clemente, but I didn't have the money. My aunt, who was the bookkeeper at the time, would deduct money out of my paychecks. Every month she put a little bit of money aside so at the end of every year, I would have a thousand dollars to buy art with. It was when I finally saved up a thousand dollars that I bought the second piece. My family was blown away by it. The comments that people were making when they came over were very exciting. It was through that that I decided to pursue collecting. And, and again, I did on a thousand dollars a year.

I considered myself an art collector pretty early on. Even though I didn't have the money for it, I was going to galleries nonstop—just looking and seeing. In my mind, I knew I wanted to collect and I knew that I had it within my heart—that this was something that I wanted to pursue.

Rebecca Eisenberg: I started collecting when I met Marty. I would tag along when he went to galleries on Fridays.

We have this famous story. There was an artist that Jack Tilton was showing when I was nine months pregnant with our first child. Marty had gone in and seen a couple of pieces. He found something he liked very much...

ME: That day, I was heading out the door. Rebecca asked me where I was going. I said I was going to Jack Tilton's. She told me not to dare buy a thing. We were about to have a baby, and she didn't want me spending any money. When I went down to see Jack, he had six brilliant drawings by Rebecca Purdum. She had just gotten a terrific review by John Russell in the *New York Times*. Jack offered me a drawing, and I said, well, I'd have to think about it. He rolled his eyes. He couldn't believe that someone would walk in and just pass up for a hundred dollars, but I left, because Rebecca had told me not to buy anything. About two days later, I realized I made a mistake. I ran back down to Jack's to buy the work. He had one piece left. So I took the last piece. I came back home, and walked in with a small piece of cardboard. Rebecca took one look at me from the top of the stairs, and I'll never forget it, she yelled downstairs, "What's that in your hand?"

RE: Marty took it out and I saw that it was a drawing—it was pencil on a piece of paper. It was all frayed and that was it. I burst into tears.

ME: She ran upstairs as fast as she could run. I heard her weeping and sobbing upstairs while I sat at the kitchen table. I remember I felt awful, because I always said that there is nothing worse than seeing a pregnant woman cry. Then I remember staring at the drawing and said, "Eh, she'll get over it."

RE: And here we are!

CS: Does collecting mean to be part of the art community?

ME: When you're buying, you become a participant, a real part of the process, as opposed to just being an observer. Every time we bought a piece, I felt that we were supporting the efforts of the people we really believed in—both the gallerist and the artist. It's that kind of commitment that you're making that's very gratifying.

CS: You started collecting in the early 1990s, after the market crash, when there was a new generation of young galleries in New York. How did these galleries influence the way you have built your collection?

ME: We came into collecting at a perfect time. In the early nineties, a group of terrific young dealers all came to SoHo and changed the face of the art world. In a very quick succession, you had Gavin Brown, Anton Kern, and Tanya Bonakdar, and a couple others. After meeting these gallerists, I felt that I wanted to support their programs. Eventually we got to the point where we would buy one piece almost a month from these gallerists, and we were buying the program from top to bottom. That's how we built our collection.

RE: It's been extremely rewarding to see their personal growth and ability to keep going, and it makes you feel great because you've been involved with them throughout this whole professional path that they've been on.

ME: In other words, we're part of the history with these people. We trusted these galleries. We felt that they had great critical eyes. We also trusted great curators—people like Laura Hoptman, Matthew Higgs, and Thelma Golden. The same time when there were these

great galleries opening in the nineties, great young curators were entering the museum world. It's through these people and being part of the dialogue that we determined who the right artists were.

But we also know that we missed great artists—for example, we never got involved with Richard Prince and Christopher Wool. But if we missed them, we wouldn't get involved later, because we wanted to be there at the beginning so that we can grow with them and then we can honestly say that we were part of the history.

CS: How did you position yourselves as collectors between gallerists and curators?

ME: There is a triangle—this comes from curator Paul Schimmel. There's the artist, the gallerist, and the institutions. The collector has to work with all three. That's how we describe it. At the top of the triangle, I place the gallerist, because it's the gallerist who brings the artist, the curators, and the museums together. They're the ones that are taking the maximum risk, paying the monthly rent, marketing, and could go bankrupt any minute if they don't meet their sales goals. The curator has a job at the institution. They're somehow secure in what they do. And the artist can continue always being an artist. Even if they take another job, let's say, in order to earn a living, they can still always create art. That's why we give the gallerists the most credit in our collection.

CS: How do you place artworks in your home? Would you consider yourselves as curators?

ME: Curators are true scholars—they write the history. We'll never write the history. We don't take any credit. On the

other hand, are we curators? Within our own world, yes we are.

RE: Private curators, so to speak. When we were in Hartsdale that was easy, because there were very few pieces going up on the wall. In our second home, the pace picked up more, and it was almost a haphazard thing. Wherever there was a spot is where it went. But we've been in this house about fourteen years or so, and when we moved in, we didn't hang a thing. We spent a little bit of time living in the environment, trying to figure out what could go where. And I will say that Marty has truly developed his curatorial skills now.

ME: There's a great story about the house and the collection. We were doing a major installation at the house. We had two trucking guys who showed up with a piece of art. They drop it off upstairs and on their way out, one of the guys yelled over his shoulder: "Hey dude, this place has got energy!" I think this is what we've tried to create here—a positive energy between the pieces.

Particularly in the years I would go around with Jack, we would take a look at African art, American folk art, pre-Colombian, ceramics, and we would mix that within our day of looking at art. We've done that with our collection as well. We like mixing different things to create a good, positive energy so that you can bounce ideas off each other. Curator Ann Temkin once said to me, "Your house is a work of art—the whole thing and the way everything connects." Coming from a scholar like Ann Temkin, that's quite a compliment.

RE: My favorite visitor story took place when we were living in our last house. When you entered the front door, your eyes would go to the end of the house and there was a large Marlene Dumas,

*The Painter* from 1994. It's an oil painting with a naked little girl. She has one hand that's blue and one hand that's red—a blood-like substance drips off the hand. Well, you didn't know if it was blood, but you knew from the look on her face, that she did something bad. And you didn't know if she maybe got paint all over the place or murdered the cat. One day, a woman came in to pick up her four-year-old who was playing with our child, and she saw *The Painter*. I could see that she immediately diverted her eyes to the dining room table and said, "Oh, I love your candlesticks." I said to Marty, "That was the best reaction." She was so overcome. I love it when people come to the house and the works evoke a strong emotion in them.

ME: On the other side of the coin, as far as visitors, we've been very blessed in the sense that we've had great curators, writers, collectors, museum groups from all around the globe who have come up to see the collection. We've always opened up our house once a year and that's always gratifying. We've done a bagels and art event—this is a Sunday when we invite all of our friends from the art world—gallerists, artists, and other collectors—up right here to the house. And we try to do a major rehang, we switch things around.

And lastly, we have luncheons here on Mondays. Curators seem to be free on Mondays when galleries are closed. If people are passing through, I get here around noon and we'll do a lunch with them. We do that usually on a monthly basis. Sometimes twice a month, when we have more people up here. People who are part of the history of art from the nineties forward have all passed through here.

CS: This is definitely one of the many

ways of opening the collection to the public. And speaking of switching things around, how often do you rehang the artworks in your house?

ME: Rebecca feels very strongly about how we get sentimentally attached to artworks. There are certain pieces, classics that we're just not going to live without. We rotate around these building blocks. We like to have a certain continuity in the house.

RE: They are anchors, as Marty says. They have been a part of our life.

ME: What happens with art is this: The more the artworks have traveled, the more times they have gone to museum shows, the more times curators have put their hands on them and juxtapose them with different works of art, the more the surface of the painting changes in your mind. When you see paintings in different settings, in different environments, in public places, when you see them catalogued and written about, these curators teach us so much about our own works. You'll never look at the piece the same way again. They actually change and they add more depth to the surface. That's one of the reasons why we don't take them down as much, the so-called classics.

CS: How often do you loan works to institutions?

ME: Two to three dozen pieces travel at a time. That causes a lot of rotating in the collection and that's a way to get things out of storage.

CS: Do you work with someone who handles the administration of your collection?

ME: It's been a pleasure having someone like Emily Luce who manages the collection. She has just graduated from college, so this has been a

terrific learning experience for her. We have had somebody like Emily for approximately ten years for now. You have a great deal of responsibility when you own this art. We are only caretakers of the art, right? Long after we are gone, this work will live on. So you have to document it well, you have to make sure it's being taken care of, it has to be properly insured, and all the responsibilities that come with that. And that's why we have somebody that does that for us.

CS: Have you set any rules for building your collection?

ME: I would say that we have broken every rule that we have ever set. But for the most part, we like to collect living artists and works of the moment. And we like to collect artists from the beginning of their careers. Those are the basic rules that we have set for ourselves. There are times when we have stepped out of that, but very rarely. I've been always very cautious in buying works. But sometimes you see that an artist is doing something challenging, like Rachel Harrison. The first time we bought a Rachel Harrison—who is a fabulous artist who we've been committed to for many years—I wasn't sure what I was buying. It was a strange conceptual photographic piece, and I believed more in Carol Greene, the dealer. I trusted her and she was right. Even though I didn't understand the piece at the time when I bought it, I have learned to love it.

CS: Do you sell any works from your collection?

ME: We sell very rarely. Selling is much more difficult than buying, because you are dealing with living artists and you have a relationship with dealers. We don't take these pieces and dump them at auction. It's a very sensitive thing and

and you really have to work around this, so that's happened very rarely with us.

CS: Are there things that you wish you had done differently?

ME: When I look back in terms of regrets, all of my regrets are about what we didn't buy. We didn't buy enough Peter Doig, we didn't buy enough Chris Ofili, we didn't buy enough of so many artists. The so-called mistakes are in storage; they are not mistakes, because they are the building blocks that got us to the master works. Whatever we bought, we bought for the right reasons: we helped support a gallery, we helped support an artist at that time, so no regrets.

RE: Well, I think you should really get educated. It's not so much, "Gee, it looks pretty." You should really know who the artist is, what their background is, what potential they might have. That's one thing that we do: we try to have a fair representation.

CS: Would you say that your collection is location-specific?

ME: Yes, it's definitely a New York-centric collection. We think that's the way it should be. If we lived in Los Angeles, it would be a Los Angeles-based collection, no question about it. This way, you can keep an eye on the artists. You can meet them and go to their studios. You develop a secure relationship with the dealers too, because we are always together.

CS: We could say that your collection tracks the painting's status in the last twenty years. How would you comment on the demise and the resurgence of painting in New York?

ME: There has never been a demise of painting. The passion in the art world is always directed towards painting. If you are a museum curator and you do

a show on video, photography, and all different media, people will get up in arms about it to a degree and that will get their blood boiling if they don't like it. But when you do a major painting survey, that's when you are really putting it out there on the line, because people will come after you with their sticks raised since people get really passionate about painting. Painting will always be the most challenging of all media. When you decide to stake your claim as a painter, you are going up against history that goes all the way back to Leonardo da Vinci, Rembrandt, to all the great artists through Pollock and de Kooning. You are going after that, and you are trying to add to that history. That's my fascination with it.

CS: How did you decide to show your collection at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College? How has this experience changed the way you think about the collection?

ME: I am on the board of the Curatorial Studies program at Bard College. Tom Eccles, who is in charge of the program, was always interested in showing our collection, and we finally relented on the occasion of our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Rebecca and I had been collecting together for twenty-five years and we thought this was a great time to show the collection at the Hessel Museum of Bard College. Matthew Higgs curated an exhibition called *At Home / Not At Home* (2010). It was one of the most extraordinary experiences of our collecting life. Matthew Higgs, Tom Eccles and the people involved taught us so much about our collection. We also worked with great curators and writers like Laura Hoptman, Connie Butler, Kirsty Bell, who all wrote about specific pieces.

RE: We walked the show and saw how Matthew paired things. We said, that's unbelievable; we would never even think to do that. The exhibition helped us see things in a whole different way and added yet another layer to the pieces.

ME: Most importantly, it enabled us to make a book, to be able to put this all in print. That's something our children will always have—the history of the collection. Now, the story has been told and it was told in the best way possible, by the people who we're very close to and who really got the story right.

CS: Lastly, could you talk about your trusted sources of information in the art world? How do you keep yourselves up to date?

ME: Rebecca and I, we are not scholars. We have entered a world of people who are the most extraordinary writers and curators. We learn through having lengthy discussions with people who we consider to be some of the most brilliant, creative people of our time. And relatively speaking, it's very easy to get into that world. You just have to join a museum at a decent level. You can join patron groups, go to hear curator talks, and visit artist studios, for a relatively small amount of money. We constantly go to events that showcase wonderful people to speak. That's really how you learn and that's the most fun. As we all know, no matter what you do in life, it comes down to people and to relationships. And the best part of collecting is the relationships that you form over time.

Scarsdale, New York, August 2012

# About the Authors

Haro Cumbusyan is the founding director of collectorspace. He is a collector of contemporary art based in Zürich.

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# About the Artist

Ella Kruglyanskaya (b. 1978, Latvia) lives and works in New York. Recent solo exhibitions include *How to work together*, Studio Voltaire, London (2014); *Monster Bathers, Blue Scribble, and Others, Oko*, New York (2013); Kendall Koppe Gallery, Glasgow, UK (2013); *Woman! Painting! Woman!*, Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York (2013); *Ladies Who Punch*, Salon 94, New York (2012); and *White Room*, White Columns, New York (2011).

Published in 2014 by collectorspace

On the occasion of the exhibition  
*Criminal Stickup (Yellow)* from the  
Eisenberg Collection  
November 17, 2011–January 14, 2012

collectorspace  
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Graphic Design:  
Future Anecdotes Istanbul

Photograph:  
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