



Petah Coyne, *Untitled #781*, 1994, wax, plastic, and cloth over metal and wire armature, 62 × 35 × 44 in.
Promised gift of Steven Scott, Baltimore, Md.

Steven Scott Collects

In 1992, at age 30, Baltimore art historian and art dealer Steven Scott wrote a letter to NMWA Founder Wilhelmina Cole Holladay designating his growing personal collection of art by women for donation to the National Museum of Women in the Arts. This was a bold move by such a young man—a watershed moment in his life. It also was the first time a private collection other than the Holladays' had been pledged to the museum.

As NMWA moves toward its 20th anniversary in 2007, we are pleased to honor Scott for his early and steadfast support of the museum's mission by exhibiting a select group of donations and promised gifts to the permanent collection. In conjunction with the exhibition, Deputy Director and Chief Curator Susan Fisher Sterling interviewed Steven Scott and asked him to share his story with other NMWA members.

Susan Fisher Sterling: Steven, we've known each other for about 15 years now and I'm still amazed by your early commitment to NMWA. Take us back to that time and tell us how you first became involved in collecting for the museum.

Steven Scott: I first heard about the National Museum of Women in the Arts in 1984 when I was a graduate student in art history at the University of Maryland, College Park. Articles had begun to appear in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and all the national art magazines, many of which were highly skeptical of the need for the museum. Some talked of "ghettoization" of women artists in a separate space; others questioned whether the founder's dream could actually become a reality.

At the time, I had been studying 19th- and 20th-century American art, but I became increasingly involved with contemporary painting, printmaking, and photography. I started attending Whitney Biennials in 1981 and was an avid gallery-goer in New York and Washington by 1983. I was drawn to New York artists Susan Rothenberg, Pat Steir, and Laurie Simmons, and became especially interested in Chicago

painter Hollis Sigler. I first saw her work in the '81 Whitney exhibition, then again in the '85 Corcoran Biennial, and was totally taken with her faux naïve style. By 1986 I received approval to write my master's thesis on her art.

That same year in spring, a year and a half before NMWA opened to the public, I had the opportunity to attend a special tour and reception for graduate students and faculty from area universities at Mr. and Mrs. Holladay's Georgetown residence. I spent several hours speaking with the Holladays and the museum's first director Anne-Imelda Radice. The collection was highly impressive, their vision of the museum as a world-class institution was captivating, and their enthusiasm was contagious. By the time I left, I truly was convinced of the museum's

purpose, and I knew then and there that I wanted to be involved in helping realize and fulfill the dream.

SFS: Did you know what you wanted to do?

SS: Yes, I did, and as I wrote my thesis in 1987, I began collecting works by Sigler and other women in hopes of building a museum-quality collection that I could eventually give to NMWA. After graduating from Maryland, I opened my gallery in Baltimore in May 1988, and have represented an equal number of men and women artists ever since that



Hollis Sigler and Steven Scott

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time. This was a conscious decision. I had read all the Guerilla Girls statistics and was shocked at how few major New York contemporary art galleries showed more than 10 percent women. Like NMWA, I wanted my gallery to be a catalyst for change. Gallery-going today, the percentages are better, but hardly equal.

SFS: Did you or do you only collect women artists?

SS: No, I collect art by men as well, including James Rosenquist, Francesco Clemente, and Alexis Rockman, but I am still amazed at the difference in market value between men's and women's work. With the exception of 15 or 20 women whose prices are in the stratosphere—like Cindy Sherman, Kiki Smith, and Elizabeth Murray—when you compare women artists to their male counterparts with similar exhibition histories and museum collections, they are still paid about half or less for their work. I can purchase great works for the women's museum on my budget and I hope that ultimately this will make a difference in the marketplace.

SFS: What has kept you interested in NMWA?

SS: Well, all along I've believed in the mission. Also, the museum's first curator of contemporary art, Helaine Posner, was very supportive of my young gallery and visited often, especially to see shows of Hollis Sigler. Helaine had included Hollis's paintings in past exhibitions at other museums, had written about her work, and was planning to include her in future shows at NMWA. I also had begun to collect Sigler's work in depth and we shared that interest.

When you became curator after Helaine, Susan, I always felt that the enthusiasm was transferred, and in 1993 the museum showed Sigler's *Breast Cancer Journal: Walking with the Ghosts of My Grandmothers*. Although Hollis has since passed away [in 2001], it was very special that her work was shown at NMWA when it was, and that it was associated with the National Breast Cancer Coalition's national petition to President Clinton. Hollis was invited to the White House and it meant so much to her.

After that, you took a special interest in my collection, often spending hours with me in the gallery and at the museum discussing trends in contemporary art and visiting museum and gallery shows with me in Washington and Baltimore.

SFS: How have your collecting habits matured over the years?

SS: As my gallery became more successful, I was able to add to my collection and include important works such as prints by Susan Rothenberg and Ida Applebroog, paintings and prints by Sue Coe and Jane Hammond, and a sculpture by Petah Coyne. I also collected in depth works by two artists from my gallery who work in the D.C. area: Patricia Tobacco Forrester and Katja Oxman.

By the late '90s, I focused in on contemporary artists who use photography as their principal medium. This too was an area of need at the museum and I sought to purchase works that would be "firsts" for NMWA—significant works by artists such as Nan Goldin, Sally Mann, Cindy Sherman, Sarah Charlesworth, and Ana Mendieta. I also am very proud of recent acquisitions of Louise Bourgeois, Annie Leibovitz, Hung Liu, Barbara Bloom, Alison Saar, Shahzia Sikander, Kiki Smith, and Joan Snyder.

Over the years, I've enjoyed discussing potential gifts with you and Britta Konau, associate curator of modern and contemporary art, because these donations and promised gifts are being made in hopes of filling gaps in the museum's contemporary holdings in order to more fully tell the story of women artists working in the U.S. today. This is an important motivator for me, as well as the fact that since 1993 the museum has shown my donations on a regular basis. Up until now, these have always been mixed in with art from NMWA's core collection. I never wanted my donated works to stand alone; I always meant for them to supplement what the permanent collection had to offer.

SFS: How do you feel about being recognized, then, with this "collection specific" exhibition?

SS: Of course I feel very honored, but I also see it as a continuation of how good I felt when 40 of the more than 100 pieces I had donated were interspersed with the collection in the summer 2002 exhibition *Feminism and Art: Selections from the Permanent Collection*. When you purchase works of art for a museum, it's great to see them on public view.

I also feel that I was recognized by being invited to join the museum's National Advisory Board in 2002. It made me feel like all of my hard work had paid off. The many years of researching, making gallery visits, attending art fairs, making good purchases, and ultimately donating art to NMWA had become my



Hollis Sigler, *To Kiss The Spirits, Now This Is What It Is Really Like*, 1993, oil on canvas with painted frame, 66 × 66 in. Promised gift of Steven Scott, Baltimore, in memory of the artist

mission. And, while I know that there are still many gaps in the contemporary collection because there are so many great women artists working today, I now see others who are helping to build it too. That gives me satisfaction as well.

SFS: Do you have a favorite work?

SS: I would have to say that I have at least six, probably more: Petah Coyne's large wax and wire sculpture of a delicate, floating dress, reminiscent of a dream; Jane Hammond's *Wonderful You*, a surreal depiction of the artist in multiple guises throughout history; Nan Goldin's provocative color photograph *Self Portrait in Kimono with Brian*, NYC, 1983, a haunting study of alienation and vulnerability; and Hollis Sigler's signature image from the *Breast Cancer Journal* series called *To Kiss The Spirits: Now, This Is What It Is Really Like*. It depicts a female figure who becomes increasingly ethereal as she ascends a circular staircase to heaven. It is, after all, an image of hope. And I can't leave out Ana Mendieta's psychologically charged suite of six color photographs, *Volcano Series, no. 2*, an explosive document

of a site-specific body work that has become a signature image in her oeuvre. Then, finally, when a complete set of the original Guerrilla Girls' printed broadsides became available a few years ago, I jumped at the chance to acquire these important feminist documents for the museum, and proudly donated them in Wilhelmina Holladay's honor.

SFS: Where will you turn to next in continuing to collect for the museum?

SS: I plan on adding to strengthen various artists' representation in my collection as well as making new finds. I've recently purchased several more works by Sue Coe, Jane Hammond, Annie Leibovitz, Elizabeth Murray, and Laurie Simmons that complement what I've earmarked for the museum, but I'm also keeping an eye out for new talent. This spirit of discovery has always provided the momentum for my collecting for NMWA.

Steven Scott Collects: Donations and Promised Gifts to the Permanent Collection is on view at NMWA from June 10 to September 25, 2005.