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3D wall art

A Mexican couple's collection gets a textural new dimension from an adviser with an eye for the innovative, says **Emma Crichton Miller**. Portrait by **Graham Walzer**

A combination of aesthetic appreciation and acute business acumen is key to many a successful art collection – and it's a mix that Adrián and Colette Steckel (pictured above left) have in spades. While Colette's name may be familiar to lovers of exotic jewellery – fans of the French-Mexican designer include Madonna and Kate Hudson – that of her husband, Mexican entrepreneur Adrián, resonates in a very different sphere, which he refers to as “connectivity”. The former CEO of broadcasting multimedia conglomerate Azteca America and CEO of mobile telecom company Unéfon, Adrián is now at the helm of UK-based broadband startup OneWeb, whose ambitious \$3bn campaign to launch a constellation of more than 650 satellites that will “create a coverage footprint over the entire planet” by 2021 is making headlines.

The Steckels' love of art began closer to home, in Mexico City, where they live when not in LA or Paris. They were drawn

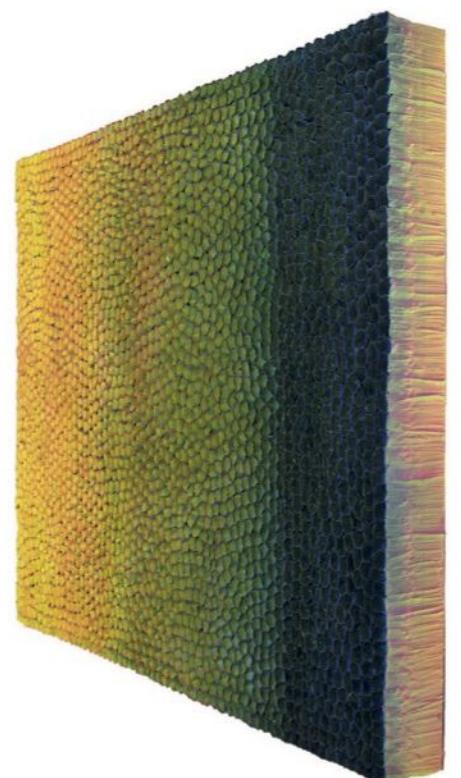
to the exuberant work of Jesús Reyes Ferreira (1880-1977), known as “Chucho” Reyes, a self-taught painter and antiques dealer from Guadalajara, who, inspired by the Mexican folk art he sold, created works in crepe, tissue or cardboard, covering them with brightly coloured roosters, angels, skeletons and flowers or Roman Catholic imagery. The Steckels own 12 works by Reyes, including one “very delicate” cut-out paper piece mounted on a lightbox. “We often lend [them] to museums and galleries,” says Adrián, while Colette adds, “Although Reyes was using conservative techniques, he was very forward-thinking. We are interested in artists who look beyond oil and canvas.”

“We have an eye for people who will go high,” says Adrián. “We do not want to buy artists who don't have a future.” It's a remit answered by the emerging artists the Steckels discovered in Oaxaca, such as Emiliano López Javier, Alejandro Santiago, Sergio Hernández and Fernando Olivera; Hernández's bold, often allegorical

paintings, for example, can now sell for upwards of \$60,000.

In the past five years the Steckels' artistic interest has taken a more international turn, since a fortuitous meeting with Simonida Pavicevic (pictured above right), an art consultant and co-founder of The House of Fine Art (HOFA). With galleries in London, Los Angeles and Mykonos, Pavicevic is similarly driven by a quest for the new. “[An artist] needs to have had some shows before I take them on, but what I want to see is potential,” she says. She began to introduce the Steckels to artists making highly textured, three-dimensional (though still wall-based) pieces, among them Zhuang Hong Yi, whose colourful “flower bed” works, crafted from pieces of painted rice paper bent and folded into hundreds of tiny buds, are highly sought after (and sell for between £7,000 and £70,000); and the South Korean artist Ilhwa Kim, who makes textured abstract wall pieces created from thousands of tiny “seeds” of

Above: Adrián and Colette Steckel and Simonida Pavicevic (far right) at The House of Fine Art gallery, Los Angeles, with *Spring Mews* by Zhuang Hong Yi. Below: right-hand view of *Storm* by the same artist





rolled and shaped coloured paper. Then there are the mixed-media works of French artist Emmanuelle Rybojad, ingenious constructions of mirrors, neon lights, LED and Plexiglas, imparting an illusion of depth to pop imagery. “When people visit our booth at art fairs,” Pavicevic says, “they are intrigued by these artworks – the three-dimensionality, the interactive element. With their organic forms, they breathe.”

The Steckels own two large canvases by Ilhwa Kim, *Seed Portrait 3* (2018, pictured above left) and *White Portrait 15* (2017, pictured above right) – similar pieces sell for around £30,000 each – which hang alongside Mexican artworks and Christian Liaigre furnishings in their Paris home. “The way she rolls the paper is just crazy,” marvels Colette. “How many hours must each piece take to make?” Of a piece called *Storm* (2017, pictured on previous page and right) by Zhuang Hong Yi, Adrián says: “I love the colour and the dimensions, as well as the intricate and unique techniques – depending where the viewer stands the colours of the work appear different.”

While aesthetics are paramount, Adrián also does considerable research. “My first criterion is always that when I look at it, it takes my breath away,” he says. “But then I also look at the artist’s education, his or her solo exhibitions. I compare notes with other collectors. I look at auction results, although there’s not much of a secondary market at present for these artists, as collectors are holding on to the works for themselves.” But the signs are good, says Pavicevic, with a few names “growing in value yearly between 15 to 20 per cent”.



“When I look at a work, it has to take my breath away”

Clockwise from top left: *Seed Portrait 3* and *White Portrait 15*, by Ilhwa Kim; her pieces sell for about £30,000. Left-hand view of *Storm* by Zhuang Hong Yi

In terms of investment, Adrián has also helped keep HOFA at the cutting edge; before joining OneWeb, he was CEO (and is still chairman) of Uphold, a pioneering crypto-currency platform that has made HOFA’s £115m portfolio available to purchase via any of the eight

leading digital currencies. This collaborative approach lends an exclusivity to their relationship: “After I have been to an artist’s studio and selected the best pieces, Adrián and Colette have first choice,” says Pavicevic. She has recently led the Steckels towards sculpture; among the works they have acquired is a gleaming bronze Pinocchio titled *Reflections of Truth* (2012), by Amsterdam-based South African sculptor Joseph Klibansky, hailed as the next Damien Hirst or Jeff Koons. They now have their eye on one of Klibansky’s latest pieces – *Big Bang* (2019), a satirical bronze of a gorilla in a party hat blowing a whistle. It’s bold, brash and fun: an eclectic addition to a collection that doesn’t take itself too seriously. “After all, art is very relaxing,” says Adrián. “It is a different level of business.” ♦

The House of Fine Art, 58 Maddox St, London W1 (020-7193 2817; thehouseoffineart.com). Jesús Reyes Ferreira, inverartartgallery.com. Sergio Hernández, sternfineart.com.