



Jerald Melberg Gallery

Celebrates 30 Years in Charlotte

TEXT BY GRACE COTE PHOTOGRAPHY BY GERIN CHOINIÈRE & COURTESY OF JERALD MELBERG GALLERY

JERALD MELBERG OPENED HIS ART GALLERY thirty years ago and has spent much of that time as an ambassador to the arts in Charlotte.

The story begins in 1983. Renovations were taking place at the Mint Museum's Randolph Road building, and curator Jerald Melberg was working with the rest of the staff in a separate location. At this time he was approached by a friend who encouraged him to open a serious gallery in Charlotte.

Working under the celebrated Milton Bloch at the Mint Museum, he had learned how to be resourceful, teaming up with other museums to put on traveling exhibitions, using the museum's van to travel to New York to meet with dealers, artists and collectors. Great relationships were established that he still maintains today. In retrospect, he became aware that this resourcefulness was extremely valuable in the gallery business. These entrepreneurial

skills he acquired became the foundation for what would become his life calling.

He began planning a year before he would open his gallery, collecting pamphlets from the Chamber of Commerce on how to open a small business, writing out a list of artists he'd like to contact, and finally approaching investors. He reached his financial goal and decided to take the plunge, informing his boss and mentor Milton Bloch, of his decision, and was



subsequently sent off to the for-profit world with good wishes for success.

Bloch's support wasn't the only help he received. Melberg considers his initial investors friends to whom he will be indebted for the rest of his life. With help from his attorney, a business plan was established in which investors paid half of their promised pledge. After receiving this commitment, Melberg never took another payment. Stock in the gallery initially sold at \$10 per share and Melberg bought everyone out within one year at \$14 per share, a substantial 40% return.

Melberg opened the gallery with 12-14 artists and still represents 5 or 6 of them today. Remembering those initial days of building his artist roster, he fondly recalls his lunch conversation with Romare Bearden. Melberg approached him to tell him he would be leaving the Mint, and then asked if he would be interested in joining his stable of artists. According to Melberg, "Romie literally put his fork down, looked at me and said 'Jerald I was going to be greatly disappointed if you didn't ask.'" Melberg still represents Bearden, a celebrated native son of Charlotte whose portrayals of African American life are marked with richness and fullness. Bearden passed away in 1988.

Melberg also opened the gallery representing Wolf Kahn, whose delectable, velvety pastel landscapes and oil paintings have garnered a strong following nationwide. Later Melberg acquired representation of other well-known artists: Robert Motherwell, Hans Hofmann and Esteban Vicente. Recent exhibitions have included work by mid-career artists Susan Grossman and Brian Rutenberg, as well as emerging artists Christopher Clamp and Felicia Van Bork. His group of artists is diverse, though each portrays concepts of humanity or landscape in a serenely beautiful way.

So how does Melberg define art? He says: "It's about human spirit. It's about human psyche. It's about man recording the history of himself."

In an interview Melberg stated, "If I take on an artist it is because I believe in them and I want to represent them in my stable and I want others to know the work and love it as much as I do." This kind of confidence has been steadfast through good times and challenging moments that occur in every business though Melberg says he has never lost sight of why he is here. For Melberg, it has always been about the art: "The aesthetic comes first, the representation of the artist by the words we say and the materials we provide... all that is very important to me. Art for Art's sake is what it's always been, and I think that's what has served me best." So how does Melberg define art? He says: "It's about human spirit. It's about human psyche. It's about man recording the history of himself."

The Gallery is more like a mini-museum than any other gallery in Charlotte. Art is handled with white gloves, paper pieces are always framed with the highest archival quality, the photographs are extremely professional. It is important to Melberg that his collectors understand their role; they are not "clients," they are paying for the privilege of becoming caretakers of the art they acquire, for a certain length of time. In a culture of ownership, where we are told to constantly acquire things so they can belong to only us, this concept serves to educate people about what art really is. The gallery prides itself on watching its collectors transform as they move through an understanding of art.

The future of the gallery is very promising, as Melberg, who just turned 65, asserts that the word 'retire' is not in his vocabulary. As he looks back on what he has accomplished through the gallery in the past thirty years, he is excited by what will come next, through both continuing to forge a bond with the Charlotte community and promoting artists to collectors around the world.

The gallery has an outstanding reputation regionally and nationally, serving as the region's sole representative at the international art fairs. However long it has taken to achieve this status, Melberg is most proud that the gallery has arrived at this juncture because of its commitment to center its focus on the art.

When it came time to commemorate this anniversary milestone, he announced a year-long lecture series, *Art for Art's Sake*, which will bring notables from the national art world to Charlotte. The series kicked-off in April with friend and colleague Milton Esterow, former editor and publisher of *ARTNews* magazine, who spoke on the topic of "How to Look at Art without Feeling Inferior."

The next lecture will take place on Thursday, June 26 at 7 p.m. "The History of Collage from Picasso to Bearden," will be presented by Daniel Haxall, Ph.D. Dr. Daniel Haxall is Associate Professor of Art History at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania and teaches courses on contemporary art. The event is free and open to the public at Bechtler Museum of Modern Art. RSVP by June 17 at info@bechtler.org or 704-353-9200. *

About the author: Grace Cote is an arts professional with a degree in Art History from UNC Chapel Hill and currently resides in Charlotte, NC. She has written critical reviews and visual arts features for ARTnews, the Charlotte Observer, Charlotte Magazine, CVNC.org and Creative Loafing Charlotte.