

# Stephen Friedman Gallery

Artsy

Inside My Collection: Chris Lee and Nyssa Fajardo Lee

Artsy Editorial

16 December 2020



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From their apartment on the West Side of Manhattan, Chris Lee and Nyssa Fajardo Lee have been building an impressive collection of art by artists of African and Latin American descent. Chris, a real estate investor, and Nyssa, a health care attorney, began collecting in 2010, the year they got married. Around that time, Chris reached out to his mentor, Ray McGuire, who is the chairman of the board of the Studio Museum in Harlem, to ask McGuire how he began collecting. In turn, McGuire invited the couple, then in their early thirties, to join the museum's acquisition committee—the panel of experts who decide which works the museum will add to its collection.

“Being on that committee, we had access to some very astute collectors, plus Thelma Golden, one of the top curators and museum directors in the world and, I would say, the preeminent one for artists of African descent,” Chris said. “Thelma is a powerhouse,” Nyssa added. “The extent of her knowledge, her passion. Especially for the type of art that we’re collecting, she’s kind of the guru. She’s been really important in the way we look at collecting.”

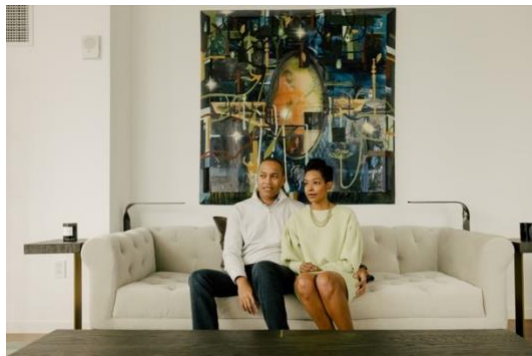


Image: Portrait of Chris Lee and Nyssa Fajardo Lee in their Manhattan home with Radcliffe Bailey, *Untitled*, 1994. Photo by Daniel Dorsa for Artsy.

The experience exposed them to the work of exceptional artists, but also instilled in them a passion for collecting, which accelerated in 2017, when they moved into their current home. In the past three years, they’ve thoughtfully crafted a dazzling yet meaningful collection of 20 pieces that speaks to their own lived experiences, as well as those of their two young children. They now own works by esteemed artists both emerging and established, including Kehinde Wiley, Derrick Adams, Naudline Pierre, Devan Shimoyama, Stanley Whitney, Radcliffe Bailey, Marcus Jansen, Hebru Brantley, Tiffany Alfonseca, and Raelis Vasquez, among others. We recently caught up with the couple to learn more about their collection, the artists they admire, how they access works by those artists, and the discussions they have when purchasing a piece.

Artsy: What was the first piece you bought together?

Chris Lee: Our first purchases were early in 2010. We bought a couple of pieces by Marcus Jansen, whom we’d been exposed to through a friend, who was a collector of his work. When we joined the acquisition committee, it was really a period of pretty intense learning about the artists we like and the market over a number of years, and then we also started a family. Then in 2017, we moved into the apartment we’re in now and we had more space. So the first piece I would say that is part of our modern collection is by Derrick Adams, whose work we’d been exposed to through the acquisition committee. We bought one of his pieces from the “Head” series back in the early 2010–2011 range. And that’s when we really started ramping up our collecting, back in 2017. We developed a list of artists that we were following and then we started to acquire their art.

Artsy: How did you approach building your collection from there?

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Nyssa Fajardo Lee: Getting that Derrick Adams piece was definitely important. After that, we kind of had the bug and thought, “Okay, we’re ready to do this.” We were looking at living artists of color and we had a list; Sam Gilliam was on that list, so was Stanley Whitney, and we were looking for available pieces by these artists that we really love. But we don’t just buy something just because it’s by a certain artist.



Image: Derrick Adams, installation view of Head #20, 2012, in the home of Chris Lee and Nyssa Fajardo Lee. Photo by Daniel Dorsa for Artsy.

We like a lot of figurative pieces, because it’s important to us that our children see images of people of color. Like with our daughter, who is now four, there are moments when she’ll look at a piece and say, “Oh, look! Her hair is curly like mine.” Little things like that are so important. It’s also important to us to support up-and-coming artists who we think are doing really interesting things. So we started looking for pieces that made sense in our space and that spoke to us.

C.L.: Artists are storytellers, and you think about what they do and how important art has been in the history of mankind, in telling stories. We’re collecting artists of African and Latinx descent, and they’re telling an important story, and that story is also our story. So we can show this to our children, and we have a very diverse group of friends—we can show them that there are other storytellers out there who are not just represented at the MoMA or the Met. There were already a lot of artists that we were tracking that fit that mold, and so it was pretty easy to start adding them.

N.F.L.: For instance, we have a barber shop piece by Devan Shimoyama. Chris was really interested in Devan, and we found this piece of a child crying as he’s getting his hair cut. That was my son’s experience, and he’s six, and he sees it and says, “Oh, I know why he’s feeling that way.” He relates. Our kids find those connections. It’s a very cool piece because there are



jewels and it’s multimedia, but they’re also attracted to it because it actually speaks to a personal experience. We try to find works that have connections to our personal lives.

Image: Sam Gilliam, installation view of Bad River Series I, 1988, in the home of Chris Lee and Nyssa Fajardo Lee. Photo by Daniel Dorsa for Artsy.

Artsy: What is your process like in finding those available works?

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C.L.: Well, one of the things that's been great about technology is that it makes art a lot more accessible to people. For people who don't have a lot of time—we've got young kids, we have careers—we're not able to go hang out at galleries every day, but for a while that was the only way to really access art, especially on the primary market. You had to be able to go and build gallery relationships. So we do go to galleries and have some of those direct relationships, and did go to art fairs and museums, but I think our ability to start collecting at this stage of our lives has really been a function of the internet. We can see a lot of artists through Artsy and Instagram; we can follow them and go on their websites and really see the entire body of their work. And it might have been an artist who had an exhibition in Denver, but now you can see that entire exhibition online and really understand their work versus getting on a plane to go to Denver. I think the internet has really democratized the access to art and the primary market for a whole generation of collectors.



Artsy: Can you tell us about some specific works that are important to your collection?

C.L.: There's a Kehinde Wiley in our collection that we think of as the centerpiece. Kehinde is someone who we followed very closely. He was an artist in residence at the Studio Museum and, of course, he did the Barack Obama portrait. We were able to acquire our Kehinde Wiley work at auction about two and a half years ago, and that was exciting. It had been shown at the Brooklyn Museum, and we'd seen a subsequent exhibition of his work at the Brooklyn Museum several years ago. He only paints these very vibrant characters, in large format, and it really stands out when you're in our home. It's from 2002, and it feels very much like the epitome of an early Kehinde Wiley piece, and that's what's so cool about it from our perspective. It really represents how he really got his start in the art world. It's very special to us because he was an artist whom we had been tracking for a while, and it was somewhat aspirational.

Image: Installation view of Kehinde Wiley, *Passing/Posing #1*, 2002, and *Naudline Pierre, The Dove*, 2019, in the home of Chris Lee and Nyssa Fajardo Lee. Photo by Daniel Dorsa for Artsy.

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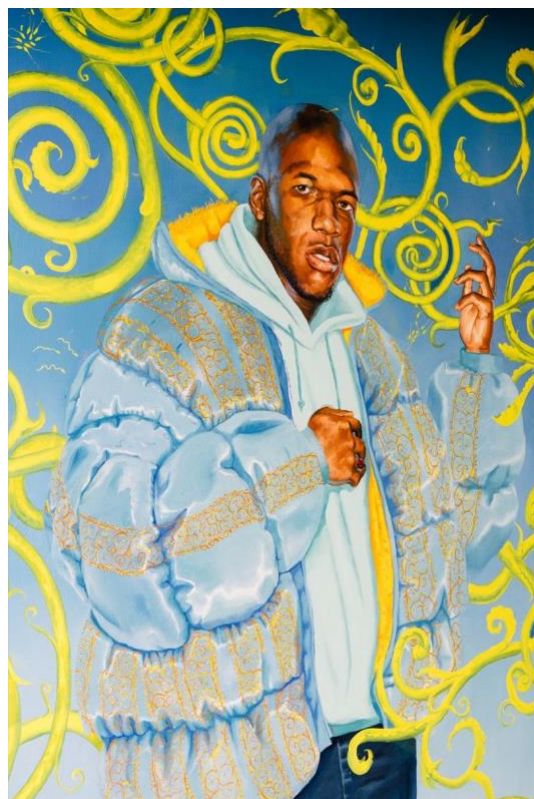


Image: Kehinde Wiley, detail of *Passing/Posing #1*, 2002. © Kehinde Wiley. Photo by Daniel Dorsa for Artsy.

Another one that's more recent is a commissioned piece by Hebru Brantley. Nyssa mentioned our kids, and Hebru Brantley paints these Fly Boy and Fly Girl characters, and the piece has both of them flying on a rocket ship over the world. It kind of symbolizes that they can dream and do anything they want. They're flying through the clouds, they're happy, they're together, and it's a great piece that will be outside of their rooms, on that side of our home. There's a real significance in how those characters relate to our children and what we hope they can and aspire to do one day.

Artsy: How did you go about commissioning that piece?

C.L.: We had been talking to one of Hebru Brantley's gallery representatives for probably over 18 months, and then there was an opportunity this year—I think partially because of the pandemic—to do a commissioned piece. And this goes back to creating those relationships that would have been impossible years ago without technology, because this gallery is actually based in Switzerland. So he's created this work that had some of the themes that we had discussed, but it's really still his creative oversight in the image.

Artsy: Do you have art in the kids' rooms?

N.F.L.: No, not yet [laughs].

C.L.: Unless we want it poked with a lightsaber [laughs]. Even with the Hebru Brantley, before it was shipped, we had it encased in Plexiglas, because it's going to be on that side of the apartment.

N.L.: Yeah, things might get thrown at it. But I will say, they do respect the art. Especially when they were a little bit younger people would say, "How do you have all this art when you have young children?" and it's almost like, if they grow up with it, they understand. You don't touch, you can look, you can observe, we keep our hands or ourselves, and they've been very respectful. We've never had any accidents or anything like that, and they love it. And they learn to respect it in other places, too, which is important.

Artsy: When you're buying a piece, do your tastes typically align? Do you always agree?

N.L.: Yes and no.

C.L.: We're best friends and we collaborate on everything, so I'd say that in terms of themes we're very much aligned, but we're different people.

N.L.: Sometimes, if we're looking at an artist and we see the available works, we don't agree on which piece. There might be six works available, and I might like two, he might like a different two, and then we'll discuss and ask each other, "Why do you like this one? What's important to you about this one?" And we'll sleep on it. And then, it can be either one of us to say, "Okay, I see what you mean, I understand why that's important." That happened with the last piece we got.



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Image: Tiffany Alfonseca, Raelis Vasquez

foto tamada en Mao, Ververde Calle Duarte, 2020

New Image Art

Sold

The piece is a collaboration between Tiffany Alfonseca and Raelis Vasquez that we recently acquired from their two-person show. We were looking at both artists, we love their work, and we saw certain pieces that were available. The piece that we ended up getting, I wasn't crazy about initially. I liked another piece better, but then it wasn't available, and Chris always liked this piece and it became available. We were talking to my mom and showed it to her—it's a scene depicting two men sitting outside in the countryside of the Dominican Republic—and it happens to be a town where her dad's family was from. So all of a sudden, it's taken on a different meaning that makes it more special. And then seeing the piece in person, of course, it's 1,000 times better and you appreciate it more.

Artsy: Have you become comfortable buying work without seeing it in person first?

C.L.: Yeah, I would say it kind of depends on the work. Typically, if we're buying something from a gallery in New York, we will see it in person. And especially with some contemporary artists working in mixed media, you want to see it. I think what's also been helpful, though, is that once you express interest in a work and get into that discussion of its availability and price, the gallery can send you several high-res images of the piece. So there's a Radcliffe Bailey that we purchased from a gallery in Atlanta and it has beveled edges, so it looks different depending on the angle, and we got multiple images of it. I think 15 years ago, it would've been very complicated to buy a piece like that. If you can get multiple images, then it helps to make sure you really understand the full character of the piece, so I would say it really depends. I think most of the work we have, we do see it in person.

Artsy: How do you typically collect? Through galleries? Auction houses? Online?

C.L.: We've purchased works at auction and online through galleries. Generally when we're buying online, it's through a gallery, and it's really been a matter of starting the conversation and then some of those interactions have turned into more natural ongoing conversations with galleries. Now, there are a couple of galleries that we've bought multiple pieces from, by multiple different artists, because now we have that relationship. I'd say two-thirds of our art has been from the primary market and then a handful of pieces at auction. A couple of pieces have been from charitable auctions, like one was MCA Chicago—that's where we got our Naudline Pierre.

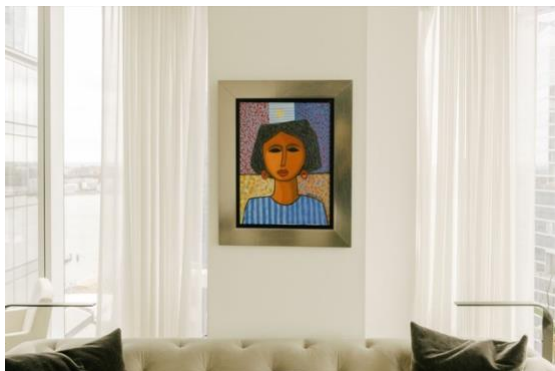


Image: Candido Bido, installation view of *Mujer con aretes rojos*, 2003, in the home of Chris Lee and Nyssa Fajardo Lee. Photo by Daniel Dorsa for Artsy.

Artsy: Can you talk a little bit about your experiences using Artsy?

C.L.: Yeah, it's been really fantastic. It just allows you to access so much information, centralized in one place. There are a lot of artists that we're following, and you can see when they have a new series out. It's been helpful also to learn through the editorials about which artists are up and coming and to see auction data. It also helps us expand our relationships with galleries.

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Artsy: What do you do after you buy a piece? Do you already know where it will live?

N.F.L.: We get the work first and then we'll kind of figure out what makes sense. Sometimes, certain smaller pieces get moved because we find themes or maybe along a certain wall, there's certain colors that compliment each other. Now, in our apartment, we're pretty much done. I think we might have space for one more piece. But now, with our home in Bridgehampton, we don't have art there. Our four-year-old daughter was walking around the other day and she said, "Mommy, where's the art? Let's get some art." And I said, "Okay, we're working on it." [Laughs.] We're very deliberate about it. We're not just going to put anything on our wall.

C.L.: We think about these pieces as being permanent. These are things that will be with us forever, in the family forever, and if an artist or museum or someone needs it, we'll be happy to lend it out. But like Nyssa said, it takes time. We have to find something that we really like and know is meaningful to us, and if we don't find it, then we just wait.

Artsy: Do you still keep a list of artists whose work you'd like to collect?

C.L.: Yes, Jordan Casteel is definitely one of them. Also Firelei Baez, Angel Otero.

N.F.L.: Tiffany Alfonseca. We have the collaborative piece, but would love something just by her.

C.L.: Some of the artists have moved into a different stratosphere, but then there are several that are in the collection that we would buy another piece from, like Sam Gilliam or Stanley Whitney or Radcliffe Bailey.

N.F.L.: Our Stanley Whitney, for instance, is a monotype, so maybe we'd want a painting on canvas.

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Raelis Vasquez, installation view of Pa with a Fro, 2020, in the home of Chris Lee and Nyssa Fajardo Lee. Photo by Daniel Dorsa for Artsy.

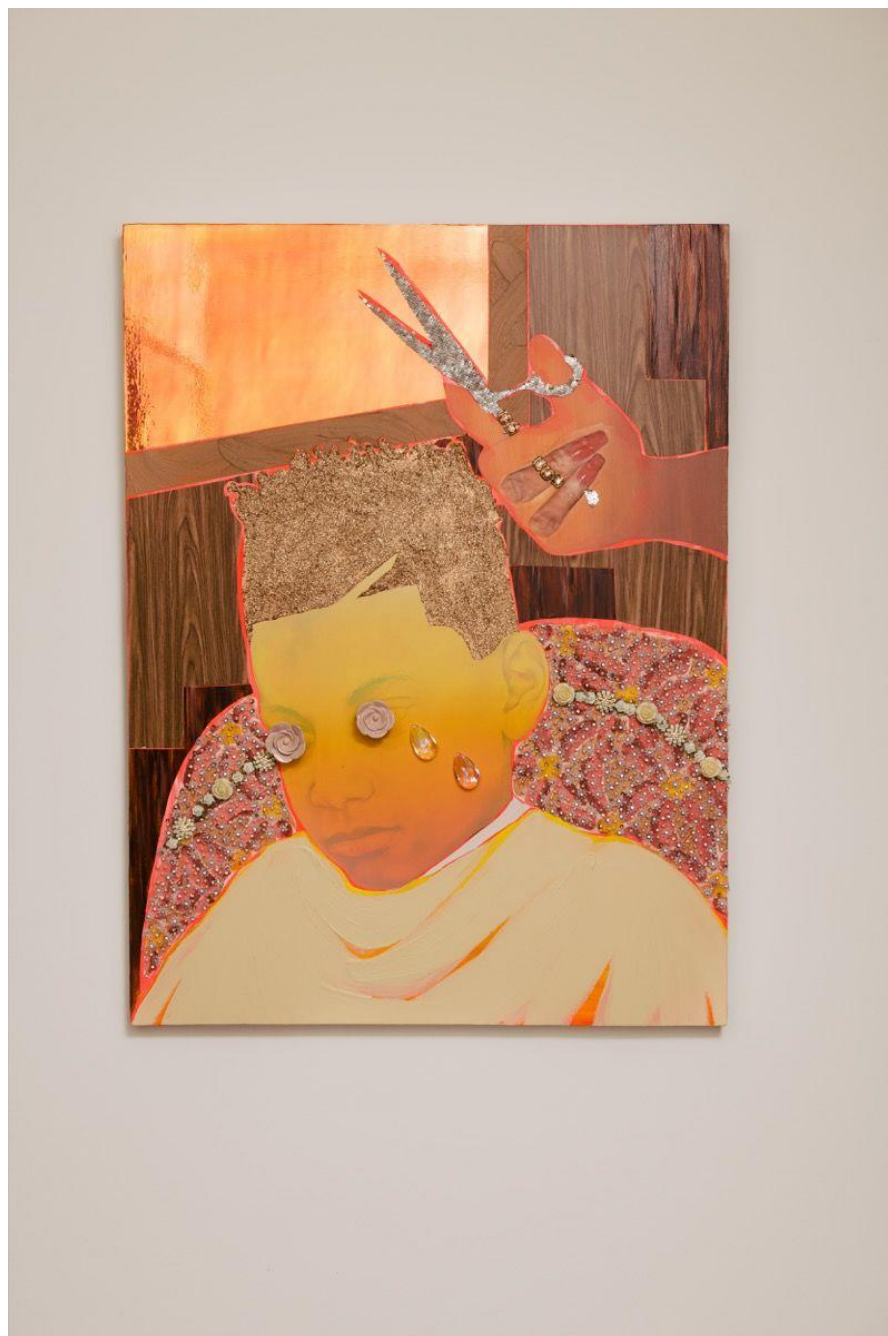
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Devan Shimoyama, installation view of *Hush*, 2017, in the home of Chris Lee and Nyssa Fajardo Lee. Photo by Daniel Dorsa for Artsy.

C.L.: It's also about making sure that we're kind of keeping the feelers out with the galleries, letting them know that we're interested. We found that once you develop those relationships, there is a little bit more reverse inquiry back. The gallery might reach out and say, "This series is coming out, are you interested?" and that's been nice to have those relationships develop.

N.L.: I think that people understand that we're collecting for us. We're not collecting because this is the hot new thing. If we're interested, it's because we're interested in the artist, we want to keep this for ourselves, we're not looking to trade up. I think it's important for the artist to know, as well, that their pieces are finding a nice home where they're being really appreciated.



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C.L.: That's a really good point, especially in this world where a lot of art is going into crates and warehouses, and artists don't want that. We've found that the galleries really want to understand who the collector is. And, you know, the artists want to understand how you think about your collection. I think there is more of a worry that it's going out into the ether, and no one's ever going to see it again, and there are negative consequences of that. People want to know who we are and why we collect. So I think that's been an interesting development.

Artsy: Was there a particular piece or a particular point that made you really feel like collectors?

C.L.: I think after the Kehinde. Around that time, we had acquired the Derrick Adams, the Stanley Whitney, and a few other pieces in the collection, so I think that one year kind of solidified it. Kehinde was an artist who we just admired for so long, and then you kind of start walking around your house and you're like, "Wow, these are artists that we have a tremendous amount of respect for." I think that was when we felt like we had the beginnings of a collection that we were really excited about. We still feel like we're in the very early innings of collecting, we're relatively young. But I think that felt like the turning point.

Artsy: What does it mean to you to be collectors?



Portrait of Chris Lee and Nyssa Fajardo Lee with works by Radcliffe Bailey and Mariano Sanchez. Photo by Daniel Dorsa for Artsy.

N.F.L.: I think it's such a personal journey, especially the way we experience it. We do it because we love the art. We're not doing it because it's something that we feel like we have to do; we do it because we enjoy it, and we live with these pieces. If we don't agree on a piece, for instance, I tell him, "I don't know that that's something I want to see when I get up every day." Everything that we have is part of our lives. So collecting, if someone does or doesn't, it's just a personal choice. We choose to live with these works; they're kind of like extended family members.

Artsy: What kind of advice would you give to a new collector? Where would you advise them to begin?

N.L.: Just going to galleries and museums and figuring out what speaks to you and what you connect with, I think that's really important. We talked about the online mediums, following artists on Instagram to see what they're doing, you know, because I feel like you can really get an idea of the body of work that they have. Especially if you have the time to do that, that would

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be the first way to kind of feel your way through, because it can be completely overwhelming. Going to see these art shows, though, I think that's the first place. But like we said, it's easier now than 10 years ago when we first started, because the information is so much more accessible now. I say, do your research first, and then go for what you really connect with.