

Passing the Buck

The monumental show that re-collects Robert & Ethel Scull's artworks isn't as much about art as it is about the whims of fortune

BY MARIO NAVES

"Show me the money!" a matronly woman exclaimed upon entering *Robert & Ethel Scull: Portrait of a Collection*, the current Acquavella Galleries exhibition.

The other members of her group shushed her, albeit with knowing smiles. A gallery attendant warned the tour guide that if his well-heeled charges damaged any of the objects on display, they would be "ruining it for everyone." And it did seem that "everyone" was there.

On the first day of the show, 15 minutes after the gallery opened to the public, Acquavella was pretty well packed. Not bad for a Tuesday morning on a sunny April day. Clearly, *Portrait of a Collection* is an event.

Acquavella has scored a coup, that's for sure. Organized by Judith Goldman, a former curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, *Portrait of a Collection* gathers together 44 artworks originally acquired by the taxi magnate and his socialite wife. (Robert died of a heart attack at the age of 70 in 1986; Ethel died, at 79, in 2001.)

The trajectory of the New York art scene is unimaginable without the Sculls. Bob and Ethel—or "Spike" as she was known among friends—began collecting in the mid-1950s. They initially focused on Abstract Expressionism but were soon diverted by Pop Art—though it bears mentioning the movement was, at that point in time, without a name. Buying art "with their gut" (as Goldman puts it), the Sculls embraced, promoted and were patrons to what was essentially a bunch of unknowns. Given that these nobodies became fixtures of the international art scene, the Sculls' collective eye proved prescient and, in the end, hugely influential.

The artists whose work was purchased by the Sculls reads like a blue-chip wet dream: Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, Philip Guston, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, James Rosenquist, Lee Bontecou, Claes Oldenburg, Frank Stella, Lucas Samaras, Tom Wesselman and George Segal. Johns was a favorite; at one point, the Sculls owned 22 pieces, including signature works like "Map" (1961), "The Critic Sees" (1964) and "Painted Bronze (Ale Cans)" (1960).

"Ethel Scull 36 Times" (1963) was Warhol's first commissioned portrait. The



"Ethel Scull 36 Times" by Andy Warhol, 1963.

Sculls acquired Rosenquist's epochal "F-III" (1964-65), thereby guaranteeing that the monumental, multi-canvas painting would not be broken up and sold piecemeal. Bob and Spike took particular interest in Earthworks and funded ambitious projects such as Michael Heizer's "Nine Nevada Depressions" (1968).

In 1973, the Sculls put a major portion of

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the collection up for auction. Though the \$2.2 million reaped by the couple may be chicken feed by the standards of today's art economy, it was nonetheless a significant chunk of change—scandalous, too. The huge return on the Sculls' investments earned the enmity of the art world elite, as if the profit-motive were somehow beyond its moral compass. Snobbery undoubtedly fueled the accusations; the "banal, nouveau riche" Robert was, after

all, the son of Russian immigrants from the Lower East Side.

Artists were angry, too. Paintings, sculptures and what-have-you bought directly from the studio for a few hundred bucks were auctioned off at significantly higher prices. Rauschenberg famously started a shoving match with Robert Scull when he heard about the sale. But almost every artist included in the collection benefited from it being scattered. History shows us that the Scull auction led to bigger prices, bigger names and, in fairly linear fashion, our own over-heated and over-hyped art market.

Anyone inured to the standard historical iterations of post-war American art will find *Portrait of a Collection* prophetic, splashy and predictable. Borrowing works from major museums and important private collections, curator Goldman makes a token stopover at the New York School—de Kooning's "Police Gazette" (1955) being the highlight—and then quickly turns to the warmed-over Dadaism ultimately favored by the Sculls.

The shift is Johns' "By The Sea" (1961), a stenciled play on the words "red," "yellow" and "blue" keyed to a soft, sludgy gray. After that, the hits keep on coming.

Quizzical figures like Myron Stout, Peter Young and William Crozier are dwarfed,

by reputation if not quality, by the usual Pop-wise suspects. The Sculls seem not to have had much truck with Minimalism or Conceptualism, but otherwise their tastes form the mainstream version of 1960s art.

Of course, *Portrait of a Collection* isn't really about art: It's about enthusiasm, the luck of the draw and being in the right place at the right time. And money, of course. Talking to *The New York Times*, gallery founder William Acquavella noted that none of the works are for sale. Which doesn't mean the bottom line won't figure into it at some point in time or that the exhibition isn't keying into a moment when art—or, rather, the prestige surrounding it—is valued beyond the point of parody.

There's nothing wrong with dealers, artists and, yes, collectors wanting to make a buck, but that doesn't mean viewers have to capitulate to the flashy venality that is the hallmark of the contemporary scene. The Acquavella show pinpoints the moment when art became an adjunct—sometimes willing, sometimes not—to arrant capital. In that regard, *Portrait of a Collection* gives more pause than pleasure. ■

Robert & Ethel Scull: Portrait of a Collection, through May 27.
Acquavella Galleries, Inc., 18 E. 79th St., 212-734-6300.