

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Photography show a snapshot of collectors' selves

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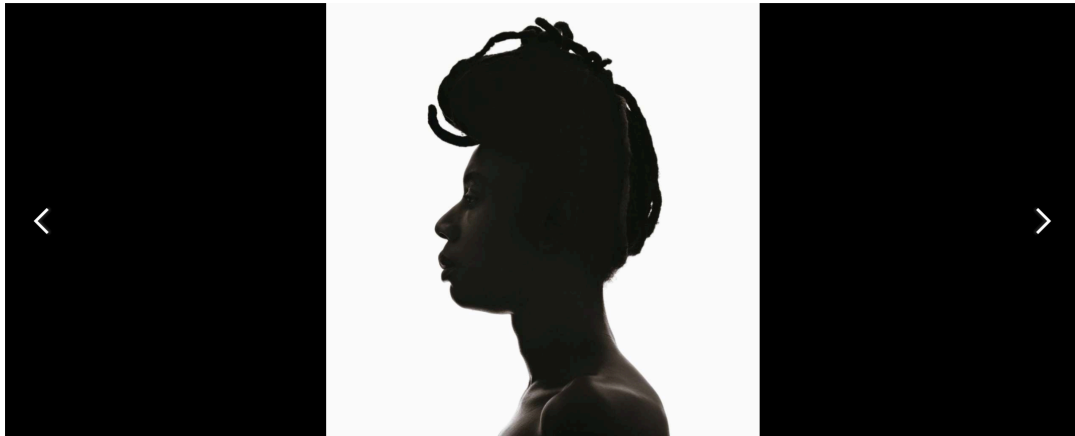


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“Untitled 09, 2014” by emerging artist Erica Deeman.

What motivates a collector? To gather a closetful of useful objects makes sense, certainly. To decorate our environment is a universal human motivation. But to collect objects out of passion, beyond their utilitarian or ornamental value, must seem a strange activity to those not consumed by such desire.

Pier 24 Photography — the reservation-only, museum-like space in the shadow of the Bay Bridge, run by the private Pilara Foundation — offers a rare opportunity to examine case studies of the collector’s disease in a long-running exhibition. “Collected” dives into aspects of 10 private collections in the Bay Area. It is an intimate look behind the curtains that would normally screen such accumulations from our view.

There are hoarders, whose motivations are probably best explained by some socially awkward Freudian theory, but selective collectors have other motivations. They may find pleasure in the excitement of the hunt

or they may be seduced by the status even of being called “art collector.” Blue-chip art has proved to be a reasonably good store of value, too, in recent decades.

The exhibition, fastidiously hung throughout, opens with a spare gallery containing four photographic works. They are unlabeled (that goes for everything in the show, but there is an elegant and useful free brochure), but immediately recognizable as direct quotations from famous works of art.



Hiroshi Sugimoto's wax-figure re-creation of Vermeer's "Music Lesson" is part of the photo-collection exhibition.

One work, small but so intense it holds its own wall, is by Yasumasa Morimura, known for his self-portraits in thin disguise; here he assumes the role of the Girl With the Pearl Earring in "Vermeer Study: Looking Back (Mirror)." Hiroshi Sugimoto's 1999 wax-figure re-creation of another famous Vermeer, "The Music Lesson," and Nicola Costantino's

2010 take on Velazquez's 1656 "Las Meninas" both slyly include evidence that they are, after all, photographs.

And Daniel Gordon's wildly colorful montage "Table of Desserts, 1640-2015" purports by its title to draw on a famous 17th century Dutch/Flemish painting in the Louvre, but is closer in hue and spirit to a Matisse citation of the same picture from 1915.

The room is a claim to the legitimacy of photography as the equal of painting. People obsessed by photography, though, a relatively new subset of collectible art, may own rare objects but generally not unique ones. Perhaps there's something comforting in knowing that the market risks and benefits are shared by others — and, anyway, there is more opportunity to be in the company of others who enjoy the interest. The Pier 24 show is, among other things, a tribute to that kind of camaraderie, Bay Area photo collectors being a pretty tight-knit group.

In fact, San Francisco's community of photography collectors goes back a long way — to even before Leland Stanford's sponsorship of [Eadweard Muybridge](#)'s "Horse in Motion" pictures in 1872. Muybridge and [Carleton Watkins](#), two of history's greatest American photographers, made careers of selling their spectacular landscape works to collectors from their San Francisco studios beginning in the 1860s.

Both the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art actively collected photographs from their inception — and long before other institutions considered the medium museum-worthy. SFMOMA had the involvement of Albert Bender, one of the great early supporters of photography as an art, as well as such artists as Ansel Adams, Edward Weston and Imogen Cunningham.

SFMOMA's historic line of great photography curators, from John Humphrey to Van Deren Coke to the soon-to-retire [Sandra Phillips](#), collected not only pictures but collectors: Several of the lenders to the Pier 24 show are donors to SFMOMA's collection and have served on that museum's influential Photography Committee.

“Ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects,” Walter Benjamin wrote for a witty 1931 lecture on his book collection, “Unpacking My Library.” To own a picture is to possess an object, of course, but there's a sense in which the subject of an image — particularly if it is a typical photograph — is owned, as well.



Untitled photograph from William Eggleston's portfolio “Los Alamos, 1965-74.”

Owning a picture is also, to a degree, to own its maker — and, if its provenance goes back at all, its former owners, too. That comes through most strongly in a selection of women's self-portraits from the 1970s and early 1980s assembled by Winn Ellis and David Mahoney. The collectors' interest in process led them to acquire works with a physical presence that traditional photographs, yoked to their window-on-the-world transparency, generally lack.

But if there are many elements of the drive to collect, the one that interests me most — one clearly revealed in this impeccably structured presentation — is, in fact, a generative urge, rather than a merely possessive one. Even more than the clothes one wears — a decision revised daily, and more subject to social strictures and dictates — the collecting of art is the creation of a self.

That's an observation that fairly shouts from the walls of the gallery devoted to the collection of Nion McEvoy, a well-known figure in San Francisco social and art circles. McEvoy is an accomplished media executive (Chronicle Books, 7x7 magazine), an inveterate music fan and a reasonably good drummer. The floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall installation of his prodigious horde of pictures referencing jazz, rock and other popular music feels like a party in one big room of his mind.

The splendid grouping of rare works by four women who helped shape photography's history in the 20th century — Consuelo Kanaga, Alma Lavenson, Dorothea Lange and Tina Modotti — gives us a sense of a deeply thoughtful and sensitive Susie Tompkins Buell. Chara Schreyer carves out a similarly feminist persona with a more eclectic selection.

And so the exhibition goes, through the adventuresome spirit of Kaitlyn and Mike Krieger, who express an interest in the experimental; to deep dives into the work of Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Robert Frank and William Eggleston provided by Dan Holland and Patrick Printy, the Bluff Collection, and Randi and Bob Fisher; to a final gallery, fittingly titled "Solitude," of works in the collection of Carla Emil and Rich Silverstein.

Artists whose work is collected by Andy and Mary Pilara, the founders and funders of the Pilara Foundation and Pier 24, are represented throughout the show to very good effect. Of particular note are

monumental heads in dark profile: African American women photographed by the emerging artist [Erica Deeman](#). Pilara's support of her project is the kind of enlightened collecting that may yet preserve a strong creative community in a city increasingly difficult for artists, who must make not only their work, but also a living.

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**Collected:** 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Friday. Through Jan. 31. Free (appointment required). Pier 24 Photography, on the Embarcadero, S.F. (415) 512-7424. [www.pier24.org](http://www.pier24.org)