

# Painting by numbers: Tom Lowenstein's personal art stash

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**Gina McColl**

As the money man for Australia's top artists, Tom Lowenstein has built a quirky collection.

## **Tom Lowenstein's art collection**

Take a tour of accountant Tom Lowenstein's substantial art collection, much of which adorns his St Kilda rd office.

VIDEO

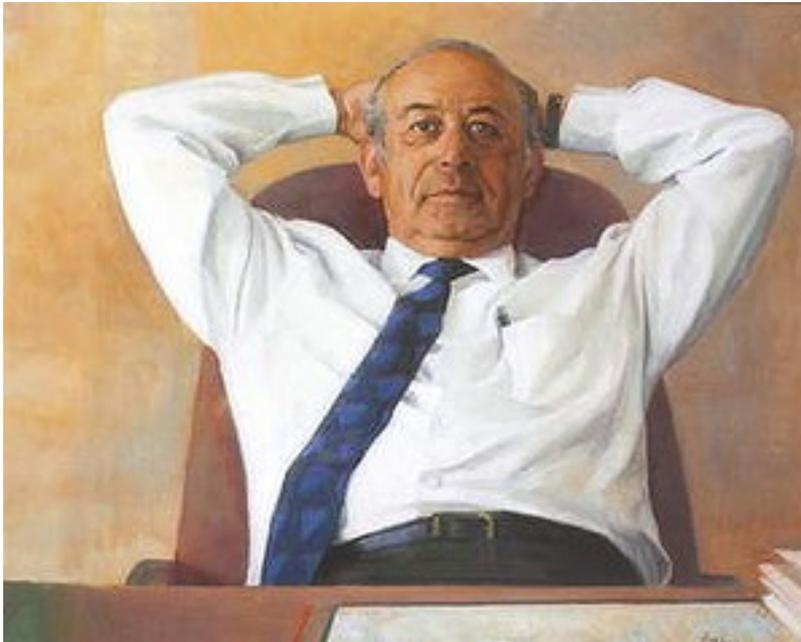
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The first paintings Tom Lowenstein bought from a gallery were by Pro Hart - the Broken Hill expressionist artist infamous for his kitsch merchandising and carpet cleaning ads. Three years later, Lowenstein opened a print gallery that closed its doors in 1984 after a decade failing to turn a profit.

Despite these inauspicious beginnings, he is one of the Australian art world's movers and shakers, an accountant to the great and good of Australian art who has ended up with a vast, significant, yet deeply personal, art collection, which is the subject of a new book by Sasha Grishin, *Accounting for Taste: the Lowensteins Arts Management Collection*.

Lowenstein has an office collection of 300-400 works, and a personal collection of 500-600 more. The walls of his Melbourne office are so crammed with works, it would feel more like an art vault than an office if it weren't for the towering stacks of manila folders. Big names include Charles Blackman, Arthur Boyd, John Olsen and Margaret Olley. There is a Brett Whiteley print and a Bill Henson photograph; a portrait of Lowenstein by Rick Amor and another by Brian

Dunlop. Lowenstein declines to reveal the collection's estimated value.



Good returns: Brian Dunlop's portrait of Tom Lowenstein.

A sketch by Olsen, *Lowenstein in Search of the Artist's Missing Statements*, shows the oblivious accountant interrupting the artist painting his naked muse, to rifle the studio.

Advertisement

When Olsen and Lowenstein met, during a lunch in 1977 that started at 1pm and finished at 8pm, the artist admitted he hadn't filed a tax return for five years. The accountant offered to help. Olsen, it transpired, recorded his sales in "a little book he carried everywhere with him, but couldn't remember who paid him".

The accountant set about not only filing the artist's late returns, but structuring his affairs and educating him on how to handle financial, tax and other commercial matters.

The stereotype of the artist - as madly creative but practically hopeless - is, Lowenstein says, amazingly true to life. Artists from Blackman to singer Daryl Braithwaite flocked as word got

out about Lowenstein's interest in helping them become more businesslike. He tells stories of artists bringing in crates overflowing with statements, receipts and socks; of one who hadn't filed a tax return for 17 years and ended up with a deposit for a house.

For five decades, Lowenstein has looked after the affairs and interests of more than 3000 visual and performing artists. He and his wife Sylvia have become popular and omnipresent art-scene fixtures.

"If they don't attend an event, you know it's not worth going to," says Mark Fraser, the Australian chairman of Bonhams auction house.

Many artists who could not afford to pay Lowenstein cash for his advice paid him in works of art, and so the collection has been augmented by gifts as well as acquisitions. This is an odd way to build a collection - new works are determined by who walks through the door rather than by taste, interest, or advice. But there is a history of artists giving works in lieu of payment to professional advisers, says Fraser, who is also the former director of the most famous private collection in the country, David Walsh's MONA. The resulting collection, which Fraser has seen many times as a visitor to the offices, is "quirky, highly personal, eclectic - it seems to suit Tom down to the ground".

What would Lowenstein do if he didn't like the work of an artist client? Hang it in the loo? Probably, he says, or try to park it in someone else's office. "We try not to upset too many artists."

Anyway, if he likes the artist, he almost always likes their work. "Charles Blackman said to me, 'You don't collect art, you collect artists'," he says. "Which is true - I can't look at things objectively and critically if I happen to like that person."

But not everyone in the small and hyper-connected art world sees the method of collecting as so benign. One art world figure, who declined to be named, says the method of acquisition raises questions.

"He's accrued an extremely valuable collection of artwork [through receiving art instead of cash, some of which has appreciated dramatically]. So over time, Tom's earned much more than he would have earned if they'd just paid him a straight fee.

"That's not to say he shouldn't [be paid with artworks]. But no one's ever investigated the real value he's been getting and whether its commensurate with the value he's been delivering."

Lowenstein says the practice was underwritten by a substantial overdraft, and that it was emerging or struggling artists who paid in artworks - those whose names were not yet established and who couldn't otherwise pay for the services.

"We don't do contras with John Olsen and Garry Shead, fortunately they can afford to pay us! But we did in the days when John couldn't sell, and the same with Garry."

Lowenstein's status as an expert in the business of art has also been cemented by his public advocacy on often controversial reforms. These include the granting of copyright payments to artists for the reproduction of their work in books and catalogues, which some feared would bring art publishing to its knees; various tax reforms and ongoing lobbying to change superannuation rules relating to art investment.

Lowenstein was born in a small Czechoslovakian village in 1936, the son of a kosher smallgoods maker. His family fled as the village was being turned into a ghetto by the Nazis and, aged eight, he was interned with his sisters and mother in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

Released by the Russians after six months, the family were taken to Switzerland and later reunited with their father, who had been in a labour camp where only about 500 of 50,000 survived. "Miraculously we survived a period, I still don't know how or what, but it worked."

Arriving in Australia as a 12-year-old, his name, Zoltan, was Anglicised to Tom and he taught himself to read English from comics lent by his friend (and later author) Morris Lurie ("I thought 'kapow' was a word"). He attended Northcote and later Melbourne High schools while his parents ran a butcher shop in Carlton.

It was his wife, Sylvia, (who grew up in Paris and has a "natural eye", he says) who dragged him around galleries and museums here and overseas until he acquired a taste. "I enjoy looking at things - but I enjoy individuals more," he says.

***Accounting for Taste: the Lowensteins Arts Management Collection*, by Sasha Grishin, is published by Macmillan Art Publishing.**

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/painting-by-numbers-tom-lowensteins-personal-art-stash-20140109-30iie.html#ixzz2q8dnwulc>