

The New York Times

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A Tangle of Relationships, and Art

By **Ted Loos**

July 13, 2017

A wall full of art can often map a complex network of relationships. It certainly does for Lisa Rosen, a conservator of paintings, and her husband, the painter Walter Robinson, a crucial figure among the image appropriators of the Pictures Generation.

The couple live on the fifth floor of an Upper East Side walk-up. Dozens of artworks fill their one-bedroom apartment, including ones by Richard Prince, Marilyn Minter and Tom Otterness. There's also a painting by Ms. Rosen's first husband, James Nares.

"Most of the collection is by friends and family," Mr. Robinson said. "Everything here has a story."

Certainly the couple has a meet-cute story. They first laid eyes on each other at the infamous Mudd Club in 1979, just before Ms. Rosen commenced a stint as a jet-setting runway model in Europe. After dating, they went their separate ways for about 20 years. "Then I bumped into him in 2000 — and I moved in, basically," Ms. Rosen, 56, recalled. Later they married, her second go-round and his fourth.

Mr. Robinson, 66, will have a show of his paintings on bedsheets, "The Americans," at Vito Schnabel Gallery in St. Moritz, Switzerland, from July 29 to Sept. 2. A former art journalist, he was the founding editor of the online magazine Artnet.

The couple talked about their collecting while looking at Kiki Smith's 1980s painting "Butterfly." Mr. Robinson was once married to one of Ms. Smith's sisters, Beatrice Smith, who died in 1988.

The wall also includes Brigitte Engler's "Bounty #2" (2009); Jim Damron's "Batman" (2014); Mr. Robinson's own "Farm Kitty" (2008); and Duncan Hannah's "Portrait of Antonia Smith-Robinson" (2009), depicting Mr. Robinson's daughter.

These are edited excerpts from a recent conversation.

There's a lot here. How do you manage it?

LISA ROSEN I'm a hoarder. I won't even let you look in that front room. It would be disturbing.

WALTER ROBINSON You're not a collector if you don't have pictures standing on the floor. And I had many carted to storage. I like being surrounded by pictures.

How do you arrange it all?

ROBINSON We go for a syncopated rhythm and combination, where things echo each other. And Lisa really did it. She has a much better eye than I do. I always think you can only look at one picture at a time.

I detect an animal theme — a butterfly, a cat and Batman.

ROBINSON Kiki's butterfly is early, and an atypical work. Kiki has this intense relationship to the natural world. Her most famous work is about the female body, but she has expanded her interest to all of nature. It's nicely decorative, and we go back to the era it was painted, so it embeds our history.

What about Adam West as Batman?

ROBINSON It's by an eccentric West Coast painter, Jim Damron. Jim and I have a mutual admiration society. We got it recently, for like \$400 — Lisa picked it. It's always interesting to see a pop subject treated naturalistically. It indicates how much a part of our lives they are.

And "Farm Kitty" — why did you choose that subject?

ROBINSON My interest is about desire. Cats have evolved to satisfy human desire. People have an automatic reaction: Aww, a kitty. I'm piggybacking on nature.

For your coming show, you painted on bedsheets. Is that also about desire?

ROBINSON Well, they are romantic, passionate images. But I like something flat and topographic that is lifted up to be a picture.

ROSEN One pattern was from the Martha Stewart line. She found out about it and she wrote to Vito saying, "How great that Walter is using my sheets for something unusual. How about trying this set?" So she sent us some sheets.

A version of this article appears in print on July 14, 2017, on Page C14 of the New York edition with the headline: A Tangle of Relationships, and Art