

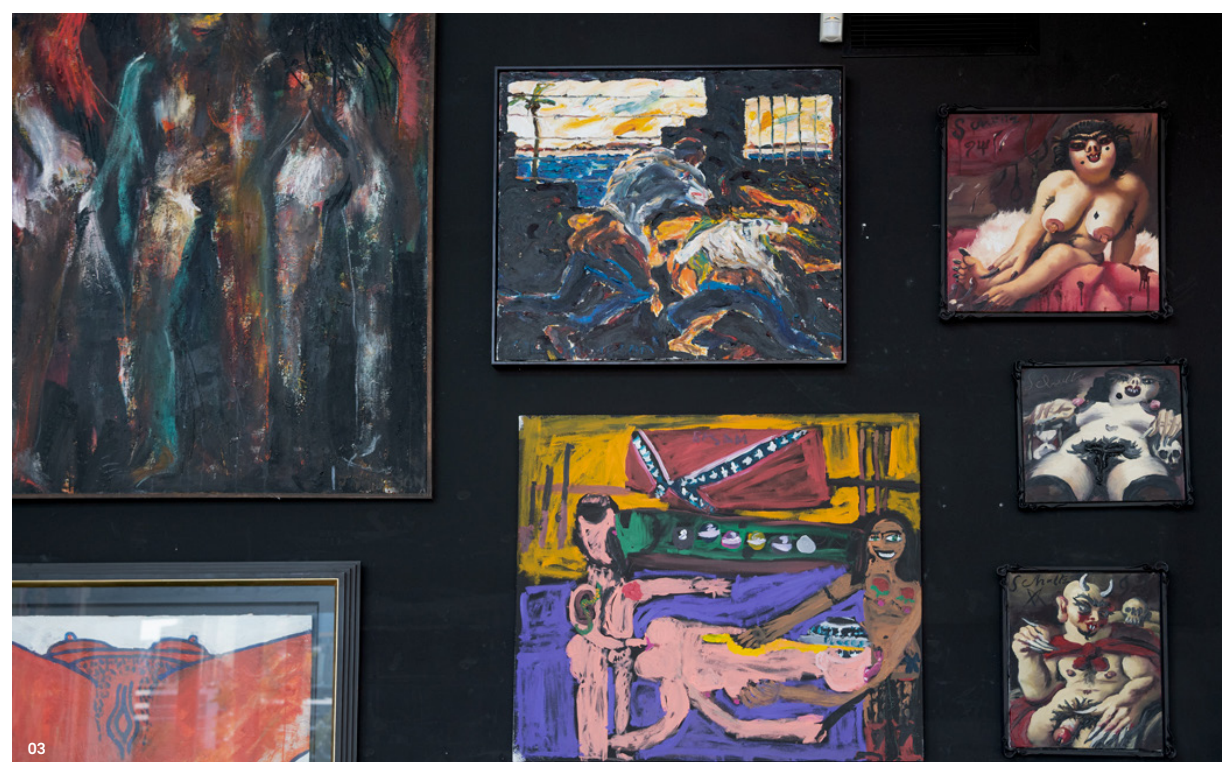


MARGINS · COLLECTOR PROFILE

# ALEX AND KITTY MACKAY

*VAULT* gets a rare glimpse into the extraordinary collection of erotic art amassed by notoriously private Brisbane-based collectors Alex and Kitty Mackay.

WRITTEN *by* CARRIE MCCARTHY



Surrounded by Alex and Kitty Mackay's immense collection of erotic art, it seems improbable that a small traditional painting purchased in Bali in 1972 for USD\$20 was its catalyst. Painted by I Gusti Nyoman Lempad, the Mackays were drawn to the level of skill in the work rather than the subject matter. Fifteen years later, however, their collecting focus was firmly erotic art. And then, in a full-circle moment 35 years after their initial purchase, they discovered that the Balinese artist whose work sparked their collecting had also painted erotica.

The scope of the Alex and Kitty Mackay Collection is remarkable. Stored in a large open plan home specifically designed to accommodate the art and little else, the collection comprises painting, photography, printmaking, sculpture, ceramics and textiles. More than half the works have come from dealers and commercial gallerists – including Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Bellas Gallery, Chris Deutscher, Fireworks Gallery, Milani Gallery and Philip Bacon Galleries – who have learned over time what might pique the Mackays' interest. It is a relationship Alex Mackay sees

as fundamental to building a cohesive collection.

But equally important are the relationships the Mackays have forged directly with artists. The work of Brisbane-based Hart, for instance, covers almost one entire wall of the home. Hart's practice is noted for its honest and confronting depiction of trans experience through childhood and adolescence. Mackay's consistent support of Hart has secured for the collection a comprehensive body of work that maps the evolution of the artist's practice. Alongside artists Juan Davila, Kim Leutwyler, Anastasia Booth and many others, the collection documents a broad cross section of queer art and perspectives as few others do.

Brisbane dealer Bruce Heiser, who has worked with the Mackays over many years, says that collectors like them play a huge role within the primary art market, both as supporters of artistic practice and as generous donors to public institutions such as Queensland Art Gallery, Griffith University Art Museum and QUT Art Museum.

"Alex is well known for his ongoing support of artists and dealers, as well as his natural enthusiasm





for the visual arts, but the depth of his commitment and extraordinary generosity is less known – and most likely never will be fully appreciated. Along with Kitty, he has been instrumental in nurturing the careers of many artists – both here in Queensland and interstate, though I suspect they're mostly unaware of the significance of their contribution to the Australian art scene."

The breadth of Alex Mackay's knowledge is as impressive as the collection itself. He can provide contextual details on everything, an indication that nothing is acquired without genuine engagement with the artist and the work. Looking at a wall of paintings by Sam Bullock, who counters stereotypical misunderstandings of autism through depictions of his own experiences as a young man on the spectrum, Mackay's eyes brighten. "I love his work," he says softly.



With over one thousand works in the collection, you'd imagine picking a favourite artist might be difficult. But Alex Mackay's response to the question is immediate and certain: Alexander Nganjmirra.

The son of famous bark painter Bobby Nganjmirra, Alexander Nganjmirra (1961–2006) incorporated the style of traditional rock art and bark painting to document his acquaintances, fantasies and experiences visiting Melbourne brothels. Painted on canvas in ochres, white and black, the works are a tumble of limbs and genitalia. They stand out among the brighter, less subtle works that make up most of the intense salon hang, which literally covers the interior of the Mackays' home.

Alex Mackay's personal taste when collecting art is unexpected and hard to define. Another favourite, Celeste Chandler, depicts in hyper-realistic style intimate moments in bed with her partner. Mackay was introduced to Chandler's work by another artist, Anne Wallace, an indication of how deep his ties to the artistic community run. Equally coveted is the work of Scottish-born Robert M. Barnes, who paints in heavy impasto. Many of his works depict traditional landscapes and still life, which Mackay has also sought to collect, and though he speaks at length about a large portrait of a male, lying naked and face down on a Chesterfield couch, it is the detail in another work featuring a vase of flowers that he focuses on. "Have you ever known anyone to paint water like that?"

It would be easy to disregard a collection such as the Mackays' as existing purely for titillation or shock value. But to hear Alex talk about the works he has amassed over the last 50 years is to understand how sincerely passionate he is about artists and the art world. Monetary value and investment potential are irrelevant; his priority is preserving the most private yet revealing moments of an artist's life.

"Almost all artists at least dabble in erotic art through their careers, but public institutions and commercial galleries won't hang it on their walls. If I don't collect this stuff, who will?"

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