

## ROBERT SHIELL

Drawn to representational works imbued with rich psychological complexity, the LA and Palm Springs collector has pursued his own eloquent and distinctive vision.

After more than a year of renovation work, Robert Shiell's 1958 Krisel & Palmer home, which sits on the west edge of Palm Springs in front of a dramatic, rock-strewn hillside, looks strikingly fresh and its spacious white-walled, concrete-floored living room makes a superb gallery. This is Shiell's second home—he has another art-filled abode in Los Angeles—and Shiell has been fastidious about equipping it with UV blocking glass and a humidifier to help protect and preserve his growing collection.

On the day I visited, the cloudless sky outside had the clarity of a pale aquamarine, and desert light streamed in the home's clerestory windows to illuminate the art. As I scanned the walls and began to take in the paintings Robert mentioned to me something that—given the room's light-filled ambience—gave me pause: "Some outsiders have said that my collection is fairly dark," Shiell offered, "But I don't see it that way at all."

As we chatted, my eyes landed on Charlotta Westergren's painting of an ewe and two lambs, *The Condemned* (2012): its "sacrificial lambs," blunt title and hospital-green ambience do seem to hint at an eerie and morbid subtext. Yet, despite the "darkness" in the painting's theme, there is loveliness and mystery too. "Look how beautiful this is," Robert commented as he admiringly pointed out the sensual glazed impasto texture of the ewe's coat to me. *The Condemned* is a quietly provocative and complicated painting that gives some idea of Shiell's inclinations as a collector. He doesn't like "easy" work that gives up its meaning immediately: his eye is much more about depth than it is about darkness.

Shiell has been collecting actively for just over five years—that's not a long time—but he has already managed to assemble a collection that has its own distinctive character. After briefly taking advice from a gallery owner friend, Shiell quickly got his bearings: "I went my own way really fast," he recalls. "Early on there were a few pieces I regret, but I wouldn't give up anything in this room." He is right to want to hold on: Shiell's Palm Springs living room/gallery is jammed with bold, interesting paintings.

One strong connecting thread is Shiell's interest in works that deal with identity, especially in relation to social conventions and expectations. Gay-themed work is certainly present, along with images that deal with gender in all its implications and cultural complexities. Shiell, who wore a Mighty Mouse t-shirt during my visit, also likes work that straddles the edge between popular culture and mythology. Yes, there is some "difficult" work, but there is also work that is quite tender along with some mischievously funny work.

No doubt, Shiell's insights about people have been shaped, and deepened, by his years of working as an attorney involved with child abuse cases (he retired in 2013); judging from the works he is drawn to, he clearly has a feeling for psychological and behavioral complexity. For that reason, there are no abstractions in Shiell's collection. "He seems to resonate to strong works with an overt, clear message," notes Eleana Del Rio of Koplin Del Rio Gallery, in Los Angeles. Shiell's over-arching commitment is to representation and he has a special affection for paintings and drawings that incorporate traditional skills and methods in their making. In other words, in today's fast-moving



COLLECTOR **Robert Shiell** STANDING IN FRONT OF  
"SELF PORTRAIT," 2014  
**Robin F. Williams**  
OIL ON BOARD, 58" DIAMETER

art market Shiell is a rarity. "I don't buy for investment purposes," Shiell comments, and the freshness of his choices bears that out.

"I find his eye and enthusiasm for the figure refreshing," comments Anneliis Beadnell, the director of New York's PPOW Gallery. "His willingness to take risks in his collecting is admirable as the current collecting and critical art-climate does not always favor the figurative." Los Angeles artist Eric Yahnker, whose Superman-themed tondo, *Jugs of Steel (A Cold Day In Hell)* (2013) is on view in Palm Springs, also sees Shiell as standing apart from the herd: "He is among an increasingly rare breed of collectors who prefers art to confront or start a conversation rather than just match the drapes."

In fact, there are no drapes to match in Shiell's Palm Springs home—shades work better with its clean modernist lines—and Yahnker's imposing, gender-bent Christopher Reeve portrait stares out a sliding glass door towards the swimming pool. Just across the room—adding to the aesthetic conversation—is Aaron Smith's *Fallalish* (2013), a bearded Victorian gent rendered in brilliant hues that kick van Gogh's colors up a notch. Masculine identity is one of Shiell's major interests and many of the works on view in Palm Springs break down traditional stereotypes of men's emotional makeup, sexual desires, and social conduct.

Extending the conversation a bit further, Zachari Logan's *Feeding I*, a blue pencil on Mylar self-portrait, is a recent work by a Canadian artist whose aesthetic intention is to "re-wild his body as a queer embodiment of nature." Just next to Logan's image, Jason Bard Yarmosky's *The Boxer* (2012) channels a rather different masculinity: it depicts the artist's grandfather Leonard as a seated boxer, tenderly attended to by his pink-wigged wife. Yarmosky, who was one of the first artists Shiell collected in any depth, is interested in "the intersection of the



battered body and the vibrant soul." It is a remarkably mature theme for an artist who only recently turned 27.

Another work on view in Shiell's living room is Jenny Morgan's haunted self-portrait *Shift* (2013), which delicately attempts to evoke the artist's invisible and enveloping spiritual life. Nearby is Raffi Kalenderian's *Al 'Bushwick'* which portrays a young woman seated on a mattress in a graffiti-tagged Bushwick loft. Kalenderian's expressively brushed portraits, which depict the artist's constellation of friends and acquaintances, are emotionally astute and authentically bohemian.

In the den, where smaller works are on view, a trio of paintings by Cobi Moules immediately drew me in. Moules, whose work recently appeared in the survey exhibition "State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now" at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, is a trans-gendered artist whose recent landscape paintings reflect his own quest for identity. Multiplying his "self" image across the paintings—in which the landscape stands in for his Christian upbringing—Moules explores the place of the individual in a world where the meaning of God and religion are called into question. Adjacent to Moules' works, Katie Miller's *Portrait of Timmy Tuxedo and his Bow Little Wow Pal* (2012), raises some strange questions about how children are expected to prematurely assume the roles that gender and cultural expectations foist on them. Miller's darkly funny painting also pokes some fun at people who humanize their pets.

In the hallway, I admired two of Laurie Hogin's tiny mutant, multi-hued monkeys, and then followed Shiell towards the back of the house. In the master bedroom is a work that he recently commissioned: Brad Kunkle's *A Separation of Church And State*. Featuring two silvery-toned male nudes who gaze into each other's eyes and touch hands as a golden serpent winds between them, Kunkle's canvas tenderly dignifies its same-sex couple by recasting one of the Bible's most essential and often-painted stories. It is a dazzling and museum-worthy painting, safely biding its time in Shiell's collection until the curators of some lucky museum wake up—not only to Kunkle's brilliance—but also to the importance of contemporary figuration in general.

Other paintings in the bedroom include a 2014 *Self-Portrait* by Robin F. Williams. It's a complex painting: Williams, who is female, recasts herself as a nearly nude male in an outdoor setting, posing in a manner that suggests feminine grace. Over the bed, Andrew Hem's *Back to the Lab* transmits a dreamlike vignette of the artist's experience as a Cambodian/American. Shiell owns a pair of Hem paintings that the artist says "are easily two of my favorite paintings." There are drawings too: a Patrick Lee portrait titled *Deadly Friends (Cig Break)*, and Christopher Murphy's dramatic *Eruption*. Soon to join these drawings in Palm Springs is Robert Schultz's *Illustrated Man*, which was in still in Los Angeles on the day I visited. It would have been nice to see what Shiell has on view in LA—including paintings and drawings by Adam Miller, Martin Wittfooth, Andrew Salgado, and Adonna Khare—but that will have to wait for another day. "I have sort of run out of space," Shiell philosophizes: "I wonder: how am I going to rotate?"

In recent years, Shiell has joined both the Architectural Design Council and the Contemporary Art Council of the Palm Springs Art Museum, and local interest in his growing collection seems inevitable. In the meantime Shiell's ambition and momentum will carry his collection forward, even if it does inevitably create a storage problem. "He does his homework, keeps the eye on the ball and stays the course," states LA art dealer Susanne Vielmetter. "He has all characteristics that will help him to put a great collection together."

—JOHN SEED

TOP TO BOTTOM:

"ERUPTION," 2012-2013, **Christopher Murphy**

GRAPHITE ON PAPER, 17 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 21"

PHOTO: ALAN SHAFFER, COURTESY LORA SCHLESINGER GALLERY

"BACK TO THE LAB AGAIN," 2014, **Andrew Hem**

ACRYLIC ON PANEL, 32" x 49"

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

"AL 'BUSHWICK,'" 2014, **Raffi Kalenderian**

OIL ON CANVAS, 98" x 70 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

PHOTO: ROBERT WEDEMEYER, COURTESY SUSANNE VIELMETTER LOS ANGELES PROJECTS

