

'Circa 1986': A Tumultuous Time for the Arts

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"Buddha of Immeasurable" part of the "Circa 1986" exhibit at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in Peekskill

There is a great mystique about art collectors. Why are they driven to seek out and purchase art? Is it to embellish the living room wall? An investment? Or is it passion for creative energy?

It's all of these.

Art shown in the all-encompassing art show "CIRCA 1986" at the [Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art](#) (HVCCA) in Peekskill, exemplifies the fruits of ardent collectors who in the 1980s, looked beyond the monetary value of art and purchased what they were drawn to.

It was a groundbreaking time in the art world when a spate of excited art collectors scooped up daring new work that now, a quarter-century later, is recognized as prescient. Of those who sought work by emerging, "hot" artists were Livia and Marc Straus, the founders of HVCAA.

"These works were cutting edge," says Livia Straus. "It was revolutionary and [the work] laid the groundwork for what came later."

"CIRCA 86" shows 65 artworks by 47 international artists, and many are well known. Artists included are Elizabeth Murray, Robert Mapplethorpe, Jenny Holzer, Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, Julian Schnabel, Anselm Kiefer, Jessica Stockholder, Rick Prol, Sarah Charlesworth, R.M. Fischer, Jonathan Borofsky, Sherrie Levine and Gilbert & George.

This great overview of an era formally presents each piece in the museum's wonderfully spacious and well-lit space. At the HVCAA entrance is Koons' "Two Ball 50/50 Tank," in which two Spaulding basketballs float side by side in distilled water in a glass tank. Half submerged, these balls are misplaced objects that we usually see zipping around the gym. But here, eerily still and bisected by the water line, we get multiple reflections redolent of cubism.



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Julian Schnabel's "Aborigine Painting" (1980), an earlier work that heralds his signature use of broken plates, creates a crusty, fragmented, turbulent surface, infused by swirls of purple and orange on one side of the canvas and observed quietly by a squatted man painted on the other. The same jaunty energy bounces off "Kissing The Wall #5" (1990) by Jessica Stockholder – a wild and fun sculpture of converging, painted objects.

During the 1980s, artists were experimenting with all sorts of materials. Straus says she and her collector colleagues were excited to witness this new, fresh atmosphere in which anything was possible.

"It was all part of the energy of that particular moment," says Straus. "Artists were producing every kind of art. We bought the work because we responded to it instantly and viscerally."

"Circa 86" is also a testimonial to the social connection collectors developed with the artists. Because they purchased the work with their hearts and not as investments, friendships between collectors and artists grew.

But the decade was a tumultuous one that began with new, creative optimism and a solid economy – when a Jasper Johns' painting "Out the Window" sold for an unprecedented \$3.6 million. Similar sales at the time by museums or corporations catapulted unknown artists into the limelight.

But the economic boon ended abruptly the following year with crash of Black Monday. While many known artists rode out the recession, others weren't so lucky. It was also the advent of AIDS, which claimed the lives of numerous artists in all creative fields including Keith Haring, Mapplethorpe (three of his photographs are in the show) and David Wojnarowicz (his collage "Excavating the Temple of the New Gods" is featured in the show), to sadly mention a few. Straus recalled the remorse she and her friends experienced when artists they had befriended died and for those who struggled to keep working.

Women artists are well represented in this show. The lyrical and zany wall sculpture "True Air" (1988) by Murray is a delight to see. Murray died in 2007, just two years after her major retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. Among the pieces by Charlesworth, the well-known conceptual artist and photographer, is "Buddha of Immeasurable Light," the quintessential meditative, photo diptych.

Spinning out of "Circa 1986" are two shows: "Redux: Rick Prol, A Retrospective Look" and "Redux: R. M. Fischer: Current Works," both worth seeing before they also close at the end of the month. Prol's paintings boast three-dimensional add-ons such as broken windows and scrap pieces of wood framing the canvas. Fischer's colorful and playful sculptures both fascinate and beguile.

The show was curated by John Newsom, a New York-based painter; Nicola Trezzi, an editor of Flash Art International; and Astrid Honold, director of OFFICE For Contemporary Art in Amsterdam. The well-organized catalogue includes illuminating excerpts of discussions with the collectors and essays by the curators. The foreword is by HVCCA Board Chairman Marc Straus.

"Circa 1986" runs through to the end of July at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, 1701 Main St., Peekskill, NY 10566. For more information, call 914-788-0100 or log onto www.hvcca.org.

By Abby Luby