

The Collectors

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| Some people spend their time at the beach and the ballpark. Then there are Marc J. and Livia Straus, who spent part of last year and this past winter exploring more than 350 artists' studios in Croatia, Hungary, Slovenia and the Czech Republic.

Indeed, they have elevated their passion for contemporary art into second careers – or should those be third or fourth ones? He is a consulting oncologist as well as a poet whose published and performed works include “Not God: A Play in Verse” (TriQuarterly Books/Northwestern University Press). She is a teacher and administrator in the field of religious studies with a master’s degree from Yeshiva University and a doctorate from New York University.

Together, they are the founders of the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in Peekskill, whose autumn show, "After the Fall," looks at 18 emerging artists who came of age in post-Communist Eastern Europe.

During the exhibit's run (Sept. 19-July 24), Romania's Leonardo Silaghi and the Czech Republic's Daniel Pitin will have three-month artist residencies at HVCCA, followed by solo shows there. Croatia's Goran Skofic will have a residency at SUNY New Paltz, followed by a show at HVCCA.

Says Marc Straus of Silaghi – a 23-year-old with dreadlocks who lopes through the white 12,500-square-foot center during the interview: "He has this strong center and a tremendous need to realize his whole life through painting."

Listening to the Strauses, you realize that they must have had a similar drive and focus at that age. They fell in love with art when they were 20 years old, married and living in a dorm at SUNY Downstate Medical Center in Brooklyn, where Marc was studying to be a doctor while Livia taught in the New York City public school system.

"We started out collecting Jewish artists, illustrated (Passover) Haggadahs," Livia Straus says. "Marc said, 'Why not buy one of the works?'"

The two tracked down the Chagall-like illustrator, Saul Raskin, in Manhattan and bought a painting for Marc's father, a textile merchant.

"A couple of years later, we made our first contemporary art purchases," Marc Straus says. "We bought paintings. We didn't have a car and no living room furniture.... We bought works with no resale value."

That was then. Today many of those same works represent a Who's Who of modern and contemporary art – Louise Bourgeois, Anselm Kiefer, Ellsworth Kelly and Kiki Smith, to name a few. The collection's depth and breadth led Art and Antiques magazine to name the Strauses among the top 100 collectors in 2002.

While neither will say how many works they have, there are enough that they outgrew the Strauses' home in Westchester and had to be put into storage.

"At some point, we thought, What good are they doing in storage?" Livia Straus says. "We realized that contemporary art has such a broad appeal for everyone."

In 1989, the collection had its first major show at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Conn. From 1998 to 2000, it toured a number of museums, including the Neuberger Museum of Art at Purchase College.

Four years later, the Strauses opened HVCCA, which is no mere repository for their collection. It's been a home to such thought-provoking shows as "Origins," "in.flec.tion," and "Double

Dutch”; a partner with the funky, aesthetic city of Peekskill in a host of community projects; and a showcase for such worthy but little-known artists as Armenian-born Karen Sargsyan, whose theatrical paper installations can conjure everything from African shamans to Mozart operas.

“The most enjoyment we’ve had is looking at unrecognized artists,” Marc Straus says.