

Collector's Voice: Valeria Napoleone

NMWA celebrates art collectors who, like the museum and Founder Wilhelmina Cole Holladay, focus their collections on work by women artists. The authority and enthusiasm of these collectors is compelling, and they help to bring acclaim to the worthy women artists they champion.

Valeria Napoleone, who has built a distinctive place in the art world, discusses her reasons for collecting art by women who inspire her, advocating for daring new artistic ventures, and inviting everyone over for dinner.

Why do you collect art by women?

I have tried to rationalize my decision many times, and I have not yet succeeded. What I can certainly say is that it was a combination of things happening at the time. I was finishing a two-year graduate program at FIT in Art Gallery Administration, which was an intense wake-up call about what was happening at the time (late '90s) in the New York art world.

I was exposed to then-new work by Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Liza Lou, and others (all women), and I was fascinated by their fresh languages and approaches. At the same time the Guerrilla Girls were denouncing the underrepresentation of women in the art world at large. That definitely touched me.

How did you acquire your first piece?

I bought the very first piece from Pierogi 2000, a gallery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The work is *Narcissus* by Carol Shadford, a photographer. It is a beautiful black-and-white image of soap bubbles, which looks quite abstract from a distance, but once you approach it you can discover images of a woman trapped inside several of the bubbles—a face, a body. . . . It retains an essential connection with and meaning for the collection I developed later on.

What's your favorite work in your collection?

So difficult, if not impossible to answer. I am particularly emotionally attached to my beginnings as a collector and the first few works and artists I discovered. Ghada

Amer is an artist I am deeply devoted and grateful to. We have grown together as artist and collector, and as friends.

What's the latest artwork you purchased?

Aleksandra Domanović's film *19:30*. She is an incredible artist, from the former Yugoslavia, who is fascinated by how the collective shapes the personal mind, and explores the dynamics between the two.

Which underappreciated women artists do you think people should know more about?

Julia Wachtel and Lily van der Stokker.

You've been a longtime patron, chair, and business development manager of Studio Voltaire, a nonprofit gallery and arts organization—how did you get involved?

I became involved around seven or eight years ago. I was shyly approached by Joe Scotland and Sarah McCrory, then co-directors. By chance I was visiting a school for my oldest son in the neighborhood and decided to pop in. Since the moment I walked in I felt it was a special place. I admire SV, now run by Joe Scotland alone, for its long-term relationships with the artists, the loyalty to them. I admire Joe for being a visionary and giving artists a chance to experiment without any boundaries.

You recently published Valeria Napoleone's Catalogue of Exquisite Recipes, a cookbook with art photographs and food-themed artwork instead of food images. What's the connection between art and food?

Food, like art, is creative, generous, and involves connecting people. The contemporary art world uses entertaining and food to connect people. I have been



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doing the same, just on a more personal level than a gallerist or a museum director. For me, a genuine love for cooking and food provides an excuse to get people I connect to, respect, and admire (the artists the most!) in my home and around my table.

If you could invite anyone to dinner, who would it be?

A few years ago I organized a dinner for sixty friends, all women in the arts. I would like to do it again, as an opportunity to ask the new generations what feminism means to them nowadays. Are they interested in it? Is there discrimination for women artists in today's art world?