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Isaac Mizrahi, on Collecting Art in Search of the Me Factor



Isaac Mizrahi in the den of his Greenwich Village apartment, where one wall is dominated by an abstract by Tomory Dodge. On the floor by his chair is a painting by Pamela Jorden, and to the right is a work by Benjamin Butler.

Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

By Gia Kourlas

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A brisk tour of the art in Isaac Mizrahi's Greenwich Village apartment is intimate — like an introduction to this fashion designer's 20 closest friends. Lining his walls are works by Jane Freilicher, Maureen Gallace, Alex Katz, Lisa Sanditz, Adrienne Lobel and Tomory Dodge — even Julia Sherman, his cousin's grandmother, whose bold color choices and geometric patterns “drove me crazy,” said Mr. Mizrahi, the star of QVC's home-shopping network, and “influenced me a lot.”

As a collector, one of Mr. Mizrahi's biggest enemies is space: How could he ever just choose one wall to discuss? “Is it *a* wall?” he asked, staring at me with panic. “O.K., it's *a* wall.”

We settled on one behind him in his cozy den, handsomely dominated by a majestic abstract painting by Mr. Dodge, a California artist. “It should be in someone's loft, right?” he said. “I've made it into this almost decorative painting. It's so not decorative. I have no idea what it's called. It was my favorite one at the show, and I had to, like, fight to get it because he's such a star, and I got it.” (The oil, according to the dealer, is “Horrid Torrid Times” from 2011.)

It makes up for the Jean-Michel Basquiat that got away. “Who had \$2,000 when they were 20?” he asked, still agonizing. Here are edited excerpts from the conversation.

How did you discover Tomory Dodge?

Through my friends at CRG Gallery, who represent him. It's about color. I think it's very expressionistic. For something so meaningless, it has a lot of meaning. And I could stare at it forever and never see the same thing. I find there's something wildly controlled and madly composed about all of his paintings. Almost to the point where they're figurative. You look at that painting and go, oh my God, it's the end of the world, but what a happy end of the world. As opposed to when you look at paintings that are incredibly apocalyptic and doomed. I don't think any artist that I collect really goes to that doomed-gloom kind of thing.

What is that painting on the floor, alongside it?

His name is Benjamin Butler. There's something flirty about it. And he is such a not-flirty guy, but I think all of his good humor and sex appeal comes out in his paintings.

What is it?

It's trees. I always think that he would make the most fabulous backdrops or curtains, and it would be amazing to see that blown up on a giant scale.

You have many different styles.

I'm sorry.

No, I think it's great.

I do think this girl Pam Jorden is a great, great abstract painter, and I feel this painting [on the floor near his chair] relates distinctly to the Dodge. I like that it's thematic. Like there's actually an editing of color. You don't notice it until you stand back and go, oh — that painting is about green and lilac and yellow.

You're around texture and color and pattern all the time, but you don't shy away from it in your art collection. Why?

Because I am eager to understand more about it. When I first started out, I had almost no patterns in [my fashion] collections. For three or four years, it was all solid colors. And then I got into florals, giant flowers, and they changed my life. It opened this whole thing up for me for prints and patterns. I'm still trying to be good at them.

Why do you collect art?

I'm not a visual artist. I'm a designer, I'm a writer, I'm a performer a little bit. I make shows. And so I look at these things longingly, thinking, if I were an artist, that's something that might come out of me.