

# 'Soul Mates on Everything Visual'

For Frank and Cherryl

Cohen, home is a

showcase for

monumental

bronzes, blue-chip

photography, and

subversive pots

BY LUCY LETHBRIDGE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
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Assembling the largest contemporary-art collection in England outside London, Frank and Cherryl Cohen have sought out Pop paintings, German art of the 1990s, and up-to-the-minute video works. Though only a small percentage of these works can be displayed at any one time, visitors to their Manchester estate are surrounded by art before they even enter the couple's home. Fifteen immaculate acres roll toward the beautiful wooded embankment known as Alderley Edge. In the distance, a line of giant oak figures, like pagan totems, stretches out in a lumbering procession. "They're fantastic, aren't they," says Frank enthusiastically, of Canadian sculptor Michael Dennis's *The Dancers* (1993).

Bursting with infectious energy, Frank gazes with obvious delight on his private domain. The lawns are mown in careful stripes and there is a harmonious series of lakes in the Japanese style. Spread throughout gardens are an eclectic mix of magnificent sculptures. Standing before a high hedge, for example, is *The Forest* (1965), a bronze panel by the late British sculptor Kenneth Armitage, from which human hands reach out beseechingly. A mammoth stone egg by Gavin Turk is placed at the edge of an orchard on the other side of the lakes opposite the house. Bobbing in the uppermost lake are several yellow plastic ducks by young Manchester artist Jason Minsky. There are a number of bronzes by William Turnbull, a favorite of the Cohens', including *Mask* (1979), with an indistinct face emerging from a sheet in the shape of a stingray, and *Fin 2* (1957), in which the sinister form of a shark's dorsal fin and its downward-pointing twin sit on a stone circle. Positioned in a rock garden just outside

the kitchen door is Mimmo Paladino's bronze *Caputo a Ragione* (1995), a lovely figure coated with birds and inspired by Saint Francis of Assisi.

Frank has been dubbed the "Saatchi of the North" by the British press. Where in the past he collected everything from cigarette cards and early English pattern coins to working model steam engines—"bloody marvelous, but they took up too much room"—today he devotes his time and energy to contemporary art. The art collection benefits from being a shared passion. When it comes to art, "we never, ever disagree on anything," says Cherryl. "We

are soul mates on everything visual." Initially attracted by classic modern British sculptors and painters in the 1970s such as Armitage and Turnbull, the Cohens turned their attention to blue-chip contemporary artists in the 1980s. Frank remembers the now legendary "Freeze" show of 1988—the exhibition of works by Goldsmiths College undergraduates organized by a student named Damien Hirst—as a jumping-off point for his engagement with cutting-edge artists. Since then he has often delved deeply into specific segments of the market, from German painters to the Los Angeles scene to emerging Chinese artists.

The Cohens have amassed a hoard of about 1,500 works, most of which are not currently



Frank and Cherryl Cohen with Jack Pierson's 1995 salute, *Frankie*, in the living room of their home in Manchester, England.

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## Living With Art

on display. They are destined for one of the three museums Frank is planning for northern England. He envisions a primary public gallery in Manchester, the city of his birth and longtime base of his operations, but talks with town leaders and developers remain in the early stages.

In the meantime, two adjoining gallery spaces will be opening next year in Wolverhampton, in the Midlands. Frank selected Wolverhampton in part because it was halfway between Manchester and London, but more because of its proximity to three prestigious collections: Wolverhampton's Walsall Gallery, the municipal Wolverhampton Art Gallery, and Ikon Gallery in nearby Birmingham. Frank has been in contact with the staff of those institutions, in the hopes of designing a complementary exhibition program. He sees the Wolverhampton spaces as serving various purposes and evolving with his interests, but they may start as venues to show recent additions to his collection, particularly artists who may not have had exposure in the United Kingdom before.

For now, their home, designed in 1971 by Frazer Crane, is the collection's primary showcase. The one-story glass and white-painted-steel house has two wings extending from a central section. From the outside it has a low profile and gives an impression of simplicity; on the inside there is a pervasive sense of light and order. Throughout the house, white walls provide a perfect backdrop for the Cohens' art and their classic modern furniture. Every few years, most recently at the end of 2005, they undertake a complete rehang—sorting through the collection to select artworks they want to live with and even moving walls to accommodate them. Explaining the selection criteria, Frank says, "Everything I have in the house is intimate."

Near the front door is Bill Viola's 2001 video *Surrender*, a diptych showing two heads slowly plunging into and rising out of water. Cheryl, who encountered the piece first, describes it as "tranquil and transforming." Elsewhere in the house the works take a humorous turn. Martin Creed's *Crumpled Paper* (1995), a seemingly cast-off ball of paper, is mounted resplendently in a glass vitrine on a pedestal in the bathroom. And Jake and Dinos Chapman's lead burger, *Eight-Pounder (Insane Alchemy)*, 2000, is displayed at the entrance to the kitchen.

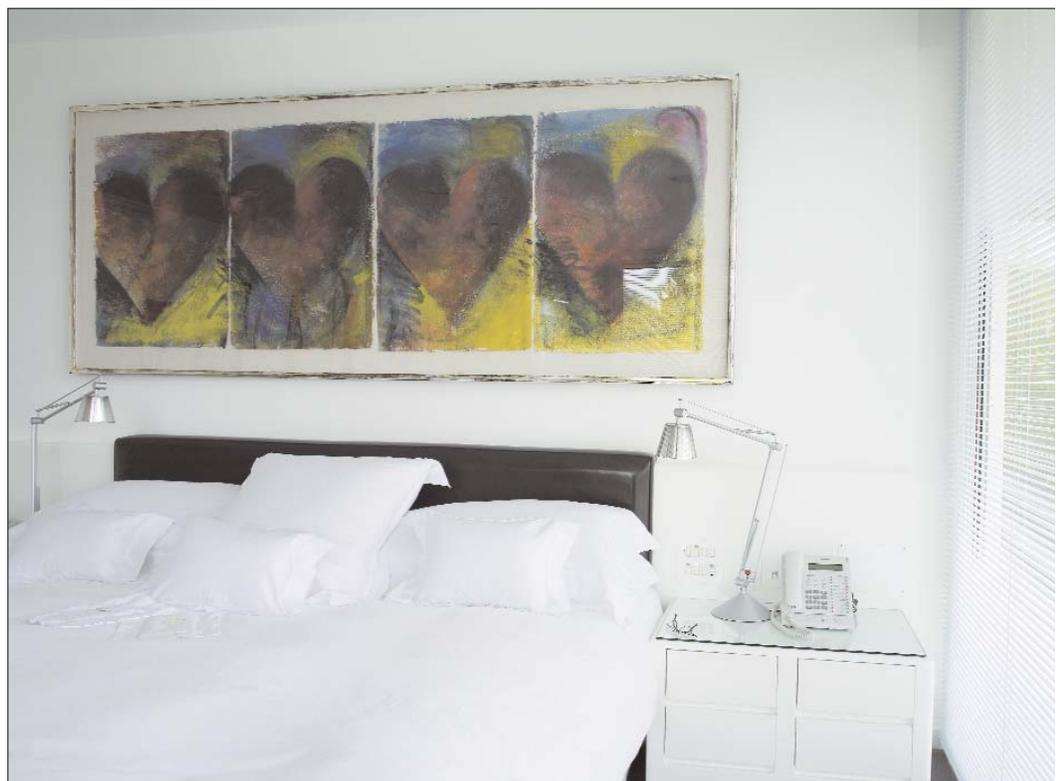
Above the headboard in the master bedroom is a richly colored gouache by Jim Dine, *4 Hearts Grain* (1981), whose four panels represent the seasons. The 1981 purchase was one of the Cohens' first transactions with London dealer Leslie Waddington. "Leslie said to us, 'Would you like it?'" Cheryl recalls. "When we were doubtful, he said we could pay for it over a year." Waddington won the Cohens' loyalty, and for many years they bought almost exclusively through him.

Two of the other bedrooms are dominated by Cindy Sherman's black-and-white untitled film stills: one shows Sherman as a librarian; in the other she is channeling Marilyn Monroe. In the foyer there is another





**OPPOSITE, TOP** At the edge of the orchard rests Gavin Turk's *Oeuvre (Speckled Hen)*, 2001. **BOTTOM** The pieces of Jason Minsky's *Decoy*, 2005, float on a lake on the 15-acre estate. **THIS PAGE, TOP LEFT** In the courtyard, William Turnbull's *Fin 2*, 1957. **TOP RIGHT** Bill Viola's video *Surrender*, 2001, plays on two plasma displays in the entrance hall. **ABOVE** Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Still #150*, 1985, hangs in the hallway just outside Frank's library. **RIGHT** *4 Hearts Grain*, 1981, by Jim Dine, hangs in the master bedroom.



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**TOP** A tableau in the library pairs two midcentury works, L. S. Lowry's *Father & Two Sons*, 1952, and *Figure Lying on Its Side*, 1957, by Kenneth Armitage with Grayson Perry's earthenware *Emotional Landscape*, 1999. **LEFT** In the living room, another Perry pot, *A Network of Cracks* (Turner Prize Awards Dinner 2003), in front of Richard Prince's *Untitled #16*, both 2004. **BELOW** Tracey Emin's 2001 *You forgot to Kiss my Soul* hangs where its neon light can be seen from the grounds.



large Sherman film still, this one a color image from 1985. "She's up there with the greats," says Frank. "She's a real original; nobody's ever beaten her."

Frank Cohen, now 62, was born in Cheetham Hill, Manchester's Jewish district. His grandparents were refugees from Russia, and the family was poor. His father was a machinist in a raincoat factory, and Frank, an only child, left school at 15 to sell paint and wall coverings from a market stall. It was the beginning of a home-improvement empire that earned him his fortune. By the time he was 40, he had 50 shops throughout northern England. He sold the business in 1998. Now, Cherryl says proudly, he rises at 5 A.M. to read art catalogues. Cherryl, however, still runs the successful fashion boutique she opened in nearby Wilmslow and spends several weeks a year visiting and buying from collections abroad. The couple's two children work for Gagosian Gallery, Adam in New York and Georgina in London.

Cherryl and Frank met when she, at 16, took a summer job at 23-year-old Frank's wallpaper concern. They were married five years later in 1972. Around that time, Frank bought his first painting, L. S. Lowry's *The Family* (1961), for £1,100. A chronicler of the lives and landscapes of the industrial poor, Lowry was also from Manchester and, according to Frank, the "only artist that I knew." He bought the aptly titled work from his father-in-law, Jack Garson, a well-known local art dealer specializing in Old Masters and such romantic figurative painters as Russell Flint. Lowry was one of a few modern British painters that Garson collected, and Frank was immediately hooked. He has collected many Lowrys over the years, and the haunting *Father & Two Sons* (1952) currently hangs in Frank's study.

Frank was an early admirer of the work of potter Grayson Perry, and there are several distinctively subversive Perry works in the house. One 2001 work in the study depicts a sylvan forest scene in which a sign declares, "No more art," and a cheerful-looking red bus is emblazoned with "hell" as its destination. In the living room there is a pot Perry made to commemorate his 2003 Turner Prize (Frank was one of the judges). An elaborate pattern lays out the seating chart of the celebratory dinner, which included some of the most important critics and artists in Britain's cultural scene, and a mischievous legend reveals Perry's feelings about each individual.

Flanking this pot are a 2004 Richard Prince joke painting on a background of bank checks, and one of Jack Pierson's sign sculptures spelling out "Frankie" in letters collected from old signage, including the distinctive *F* of the Firestone tire logo.

Around the corner, in the kitchen, beside Frank's 1945 Wurlitzer jukebox, Tracey Emin's *You forgot to Kiss my Soul* (2001) climbs across the wall. Cherryl says she finds this neon piece particularly affecting. When she is out exercising in the fields on a dark, wintry morning, the sight of the illuminated piece comforts her. "It draws me back into the house," says Cherryl. "It's the heart of my kitchen." ■