

The nutcase's guide to buying

Frank Cohen tells Jackie Wullschlager how he went from postcard-size Lowrys to filling a warehouse

What is a collector? Someone who buys a bit of art, puts it on the wall and then, when the house is full, stops. So what do you call a compulsive buyer who ends up with a warehouse full of things? A nutcase?

So says collector Frank Cohen, who five years ago opened such a warehouse as a private gallery, Initial Access in Wolverhampton, to display international contemporary work. "Not many people go, we get a few stragglers," he says cheerfully. "There's a massive gap between the north and south of England. How many collectors do you know in the north?"

Recently, 68-year-old Cohen, a short, energetic man with a broad face, thick, flopping grey hair and a strong Manchester accent who made his fortune in DIY stores, posed the same question to the Duke of Devonshire. "The Duke wants to do something for the people of the north. I've told him to dig out northern collectors, see if there are any others. I invited him to Initial Access. He's a very non-snobby, ordinary character, a fabulous man. I took him to the pub for gammon and chips and he asked if I would be interested in putting on a show at Chatsworth."

The exhibition, *Frank and Cherryl Cohen at Chatsworth*, opens next week at the great house in Derbyshire, northern England. It is the first exhibition to showcase the modern British art – including significant works by Stanley Spencer, LS Lowry, Edward Burra, Frank Auerbach – amassed by Cohen and his wife in the past 40 years. "Modern British is my first love, my real passion," he says. "It goes deeper than contemporary art."

We are poring over images in his collection. The Chatsworth selection spans a century: from Matthew Smith's 1915 "Connie Martin" ("fauvish") to Leon Kossoff's 1972 "Portrait of Father" ("I love that painting!") to work by 36-year-old Stuart Pearson Wright. ("mega-influenced by Freud, and the subjects can be a bit tough:

guys with their dicks hanging out, but I've got some great ones").

Then there are those not going to Chatsworth – or home to Manchester. Cohen points out Nicholas Munro's fibreglass "Dude Cowboy". "If I brought that home, Cherryl would throw me out. Only a meshuggeneh like me would buy that." He relishes the piece, but admits: "I've bought some real bullshit. If that's coming in, you're going out," Cherryl says. She's in fashion [she owns the designer Clothes Shop in Wilmslow, near Manchester]. She's got a better eye than me. I'm still buying contemporary, but I'm being more selective than I've ever been. I've got rid of a lot. I bought a lot of tonnage and didn't know what to do with it, so I went back to the dealers. When I've done a show, I pick up the phone, sell things back."

I have met Cohen several times before at Initial Access; though always candid, he now seems liberated by the Chatsworth venture and unusually outspoken. Tate? "A nightmare. You give them £1m and don't even get a thank you letter." Leading modern British dealer Richard Green? "He buys something at auction on Monday, it's in his window on Tuesday. But you can always do a deal, because you know how much he's paid." Global gallerist Larry Gagosian? "I bought a piece for £10,000, then sometime later saw it for £500,000. Larry said: 'I bet you like it a lot more now.' And I said: 'Yeah, it turns me on a bit more.' But if you write that, it makes me look a fraud and a phoney!"

The future of his own collection? "I'd like the kids [Georgina and Adam Cohen, who both work for Gagosian] to take it on, but what the hell, really? When I'm dead, I'm dead, I don't care any more."

What sort of art does this super-realist have at home? "A Subodh Gupta painting of pots and pans, a pink elephant by Carsten Höller – beautiful, it lies on the floor like it's falling asleep like a dog – a Franz West sculpture, Lowry, Auerbach,

Brits The Cohens at home, with works by William Roberts and Barry Flanagan; below, from left: Matthew Smith's 'Connie Martin' (1915); 'Family Bereavement' (1913) by David Bomberg

Liz Lock, works courtesy of Frank Cohen Collection



William Roberts, William Scott. I like to mix and match contemporary and Modern British. I think it works because the house is glass and steel, in the style of Mies van der Rohe."

Vigour, an overwhelming figurative impulse and a down-to-earth aesthetic

sometimes verging on the burlesque surely unites this collection of different generations and locales, and reflects its creator's exuberant yet matter-of-fact personality.

"I always had a collector's mentality," says Cohen. "Cigarette cards, coins. Then I met Cherryl, her father was an art dealer, an old Yiddishe schmuck. He sold limited edition prints – Lowry, Russell Flint – for £15. When I went to pick up Cherryl, I'd buy one. I didn't really want them, I wanted Cherryl. He must have thought: 'I've got a real schmuck here.' Then I thought, why am I wasting time buying these prints? I should buy a painting! Lowry was the first to turn me on, I related to him because I knew the places he painted."

He bought a "postcard-size" canvas, "Our Family", and "ended up searching the country for Lowrys. I wasn't

that wealthy, I paid first £1,000, then £5,000, then £10,000." His most expensive Lowry, a highlight at Chatsworth, is "Father and Two Sons" (1950).

"It reminded me of the furniture company, Perrins, where I worked when I left school at 15 – everyone looked like that, in black with winged collars, filling in their books. Lots of people find it a difficult picture but I like very difficult pictures. I've got a Bomberg – 'Family Bereavement' – where they all sit shivering."

Next, Cohen became "besotted with Burra" – he loaned nine works to Pallant House's 2011 retrospective.

"I like the markets [Cohen worked on a market stall in the 1950s], the seedy bars. Lowry saw street life, Burra saw low life." Then, in the late 1980s, he started collecting contemporary art "because it's affiliated to everything: fashion, film. The parties, art fairs, it was my entertainment, my hobby, so I had to get into that area. In the early days it was even more fun because we were buying very cheap, before the heavyweights – the Russians, Indians, Brazilians, Chinese – started in the 2000s. Then it became mad, out of reach, prices went bananas. They're buying off-plan, those guys."

Cohen meanwhile is sobering up. "I've gone backwards, not forwards. I'm buying Sickert, Gore. But Impressionism's beyond my reach. Even Modern British is becoming very expen-

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sive. The Evill-Frost sale [Sotheby's 2011 auction of an important British collection] was a turning point.

"There's not much around. Barbara Hepworth will be the next big thing, I haven't got one, I've been looking for ages, can't find one I want. And I'm looking for a great Ben Nicholson. Everyone's looking for the same pieces. I'm looking at English pop too – Allen Jones, early Peter Blake; interesting, a bit undervalued. I'm not running to pay millions, I've always bought through the ranks. But then, if you get it easily, it's usually not that great. If you've paid a lot of money, you know it's good because lots of people are after it. My biggest problem is I've never had all the money in the world."

Frank and Cherryl Cohen at Chatsworth, March 19-June 10, www.chatsworth.org