

THE CANVAS

MONTHLY

Collectors Issue



Above: Jordan Casteel's 'Cansuela' (2019). Oil on canvas, 78 X 90 inches. Courtesy Casey Kaplan Gallery and the Komal Shah & Gaurav Garg Collection.

Who Said Tech
Isn't Interested
in Art?



Komal Shah *on* Reframing *the* Narrative

By: Jacoba Urist

Komal Shah came to the artworld with an outsider's clarity and a newcomer's passion. Now one of America's top collectors and a significant player in museum philanthropy, for over twenty years, she had an esteemed career as an executive in engineering and product management at big name Silicon Valley firms like Yahoo, Oracle, and Netscape. Yet in a fairly short time, she and her husband, Gaurav Garg, the founder of Wing Venture Capital, have steadily climbed the ranks of the artworld, building a stellar collection centered on female artists and artists of color that any member of the 'old guard' would be proud to call their own. While their keen aesthetic gravitates towards stalwart abstract painters—with artists such as Joan Mitchell, Mark Bradford, and Sam Gilliam prominently featured throughout their collection—the Bay Area power duo are also known for taking risks on younger, emerging talent, before they attract the attention of the rest of the artworld.

Since she stepped back from working full time in tech, Shah has become a prominent supporter of some of the most important museums in the world. She has served on the North American acquisitions committee for the Tate Modern in London, was appointed as an SFMOMA trustee in 2018, and in recent years has served as a trustee of the Tate Americas Foundation and member of the Hammer at UCLA's board of advisors. But she has perhaps become most known for her 'Artists on the Future' conversation series at Stanford University which pairs world-famous artists with cultural thought leaders to discuss vital social issues through an interdisciplinary lens. A testament to the prominent role she now occupies in the artworld ecosystem, previous talks have featured artistic luminaries no less than Teresita Fernandez, Shirin Neshat, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Lynda Benglis, Dana Schutz, and Lorna Simpson.

In the hectic weeks leading up to Art Basel Miami Beach, I caught up with Komal to hear her thoughts on a wide variety of topics currently coursing through the critic-collector-dealer class. As a museum power-player, she offers her opinions on deaccessioning— including the controversial sale of SFMOMA's Rothko for \$50 million in 2019— as well as her concerns about institutions and collectors who might see acquiring diverse artists as merely a passing fad. Building on her extensive Silicon Valley background, she shares her thoughts on everything from NFTs to how online viewing rooms can be improved upon going forward. And finally, Shah takes us step-by-step through her approach to collecting, confessing along the way which artists first caught her attention and catalyzed her entree into the artworld to begin with, and reveals her and Garg's ultimate plans for the blue-chip collection they've spent the better part of two decades building.

Interview begins ▼

● **Jacoba Urist: A former computer scientist and technical engineer, you don't hail from the traditional art crowd. Yet now, you're an SFMOMA trustee; you and your husband Gaurav Garg rank on ARTnews's Top 200 Collectors list; and you work closely with the Tate in London and the Hammer Museum in LA. How did you first break into the artworld?**

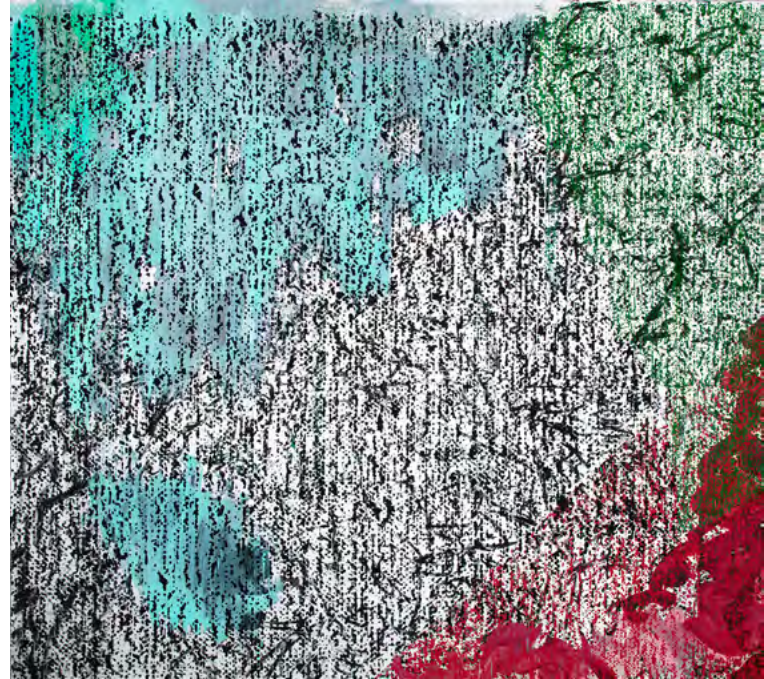
Komal Shah: I came to the U.S. 30 years ago to study computer science as a graduate student at Stanford. I'd always loved programming and taught programming when I was 15, back in India. I was one of three women in a class of 100 in my master's program. I worked at Oracle, Yahoo, Netscape, and several other startups, some of which got acquired, some of which were less successful. But in 2008, I decided to try to work part-time because our son needed some help and occupational therapy. That's actually when some of my genetic programming, you could say, kicked in and I realized that if I didn't step back from my career a little to care for our son, I would never forgive myself. But my profession was product management, which is really running the whole product line from start to finish, so it was really hard to do part time. In the end, I decided to quit work, which I never would have considered up until that point.

One thing led to another, and I became a trustee at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, because I'm Indian. I really enjoyed the historical aspect of the role, but I realized, by that point that I had spent more than half my life in the U.S., and that this country is my home. I cared about interacting with people from the U.S. as opposed to being confined solely to interacting with the artworld through my Indian identity. I, along with another trustee at the museum, Pamela Joyner, realized that we were both odd ducks in the context of the institution. Eventually, she invited me to go with her on a day trip to look at art in New York, and there was this phenomenal art historian and curator, Mark Godfrey, who became my guide on this journey. Once I started looking at work through his lens, I fell in love. That was my big moment, about ten years ago, when I realized that not only did I greatly enjoy appreciating art, but there was a magical moment when I said to myself, "Now I need to collect. I need to be an active participant in this world." From there, it has only deepened to the point of becoming a total addiction, and actually more time consuming than a full-time job. But it's a job that excites and energizes me like nothing else.

Jacoba Urist: Is there one piece that first connected those dots for you and transformed you from art viewer to passionate art collector— an artist whose work you remember as the first piece you had to possess?

Komal Shah: It's funny you ask that because I distinctly remember feeling that way about one of the early pieces I saw by Jacqueline Humphries at the 2014 Whitney Biennial. It was a huge moment for me. I just stared at the work for about

half an hour. I was mesmerized. There was also a work in that exhibition by Laura Owens that changed everything for me. I also remember feeling that way when I chanced upon Charlene von Hyle's paintings for the first time, too. Those were the three artists whose work I saw and instantly fell absolutely head over heels for early on, without knowing anything about them. All three artists— Jacqueline, Laura, and Charlene— are in our collection now.



Jacqueline Humphries' 'I//I' (2014). Courtesy Green Naftali Gallery and the Komal Shah & Gaurav Garg Collection

Jacoba Urist: Your collection predominantly features female artists. I'm curious how you feel about that description. I've certainly never heard anyone call David Hockney or Ed Ruscha male artists.

Komal Shah: To answer that question, let me step back a bit. As my journey in the artworld progressed, I started meeting all these artists: Jacqueline and Laura, as well as Amy Sillman, Mary Weatherford, and Dana Schutz, among others. I discovered this whole network of women who were artists and who all championed one another. As I started building relationships and friendships with them and with their galleries, I realized how stacked the odds are against women in the art world. Curators I met asked me, 'what is really going to be the focus of your collection?' I mean, why spend so much money and energy? It is just a trivial fancy? I realized that all my life I've supported women's causes and I've tried to champion them at different levels throughout my professional life. So, I decided that if I was going to be spending my time and money on art, and if I was going to be putting my passion and energy into this field, it better be focused on a cause that matters. That's how I decided to build our collection around works by women.

With that said, it's obviously now become quite fashionable to do so. I remember some collectors we visited in Chicago a few years back, as part of an SFMOMA trip. Many of the couples we visited collected quite a bit of Modernist and AbEx artists, and they've done incredibly well in terms of the appreciation of their art portfolio. But I distinctly remember them saying, "Yeah, yeah, we need to get some women into our collection. We don't have any women." It was clear that they were interested in pursuing whatever was fashionable at the moment. So, I definitely worry about this whole checklist phenomenon. On the one hand, it's a good thing that people are now paying more attention to women artists, and I hope that once they see the work, and they start getting familiar with these artists—even though there are these strange disparities and circumstances that have caused them to look into the work in the first place—they will understand how amazing it is. I just hope it's not a fad that goes away over time.

However, I believe that there is still clearly bias in the art world. There are certain women who have really gained prominence and who are looked upon as heroes. For instance, there are a lot of young women these days who are opening evening auctions, and I absolutely adore their work. I'm very happy that their talent is being recognized. I think, 'Yes! It's payback time!' But it does make me a little nervous that they're possibly being set up for decline or heartbreak in the future. If you're 27 or 31-years old and your work is being sold on the auction market for twenty times its primary market price, it's a bit hard to manage for both the galleries and the artists.

Jacoba Urist: Given your role on SFMOMA's board, what are your thoughts on museums deaccessioning artworks to acquire works by newer—and often female—artists for their collections? It's a tough balancing act.

Komal Shah: To me, deaccessioning is a very powerful approach that allows museums to respond to the current moment, reflecting racial and gender diversity in their collections, and no longer being mired in the past. I applaud the efforts of several museums – including SFMOMA– to really change their collections and address art-historical gaps. What former chief curator Gary Garrels did with the Rothko deaccession was particularly important. He sold a Rothko painting from 1960 at Sotheby's Contemporary Art Evening sale in May of 2019 for \$50 million. The quality and breadth of the work that we have been able to bring into the museum as a result is truly fantastic. We were able to acquire ten new artists with the funds from that sale.

For museums, private donations have usually been the biggest source of capital and income. And lately, there have been all kinds of conversations around the purity of the money coming into museums from private donors who may

have their own agendas. But with a deaccession, you can avoid all of those issues. Honestly, I think it should be a tool that's used more often, as long as the decisions are carefully vetted and done with serious forethought and consideration. We're currently in a great moment in art history in terms of parity and diversity for artists. Yes, there are some extremes where it's not working; I don't love the cancel culture aspect of the moment. But here we are, reckoning with injustices of the past. The lens that was used was biased so why not correct it? Museums like SFMOMA have multiple Rothkos. Do we need every single one? I don't think so; 99 percent of most museum collections sit in storage. Museums struggle to reflect the now because they're shackled by the decisions of the past. In the wider culture, we're bringing down statues, we're renaming sports teams, we're doing quite a lot in society toward equality, equity, and parity. We need to do the same in institutional collections, too.

Jacoba Urist: During Covid, you acquired artwork from Gee's Bend, a longstanding community of artist quilt makers in rural Alabama who are finally getting their due and entering museum collections after working for over 100 years. Textiles seem like a departure for you. How does this new work fit into your overall collecting approach?

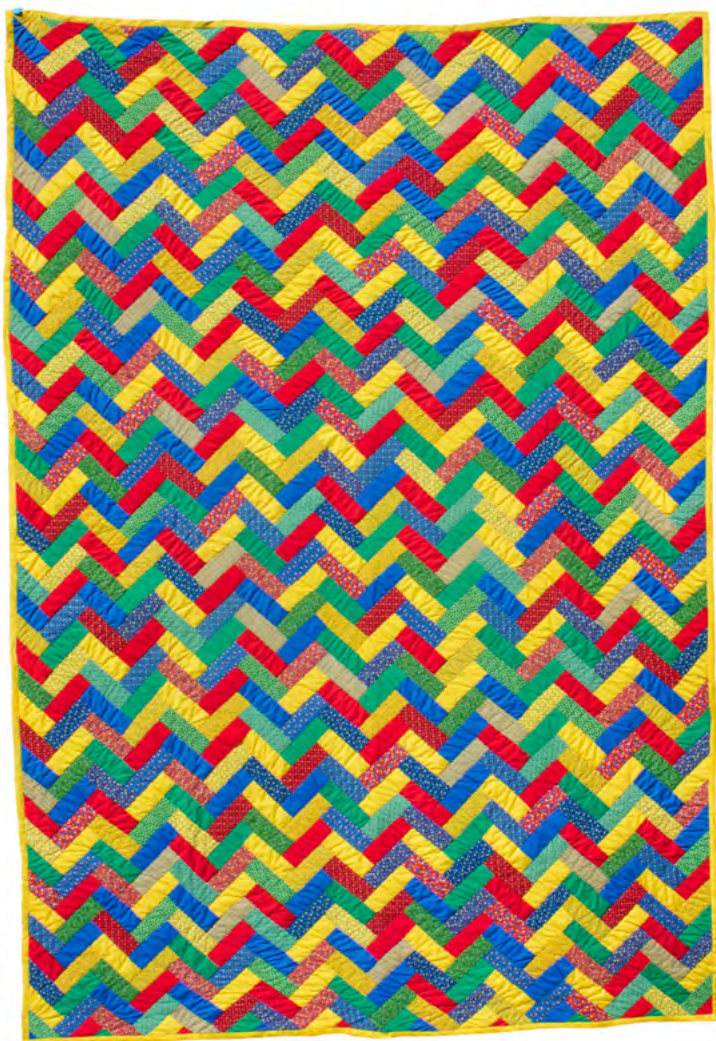
Komal Shah: Our collection tends to be abstract, expressive, muscular, and powerful. What I have been trying to do when we take people through the collection in our home – and we have many people visit to see our collection all the time – is to have this big moment as they're admiring it where I say: 'Well, these are all created by women.' So, there's this big aha moment that hopefully causes them to start thinking about parity from a visual perspective.

“ Our collection tends to be abstract, expressive, muscular, and powerful.”

For the most part, though, works that could be described as “feminine,” to use a blanket term, haven't really entered our collection. Partly, I think this is due to my tech background and always wearing Armani pants and suits all the time. Somehow, feminine aspects of artwork almost felt inferior in a way. But recently, I had my own aha moment. Over the last two years during the pandemic, I started wondering about who came up with the criteria for ranking art in the first place? It started dawning on me that the ways in which art is valued, defined, and appreciated has historically been

set by men. Works that have been traditionally considered decorative, craft, or quilts haven't been considered high art, because they were being made at home by women.

The first piece from Gee's Bend that actually got my attention was by the artist group called Freedom Quilting Bee, a collective started by Lucy Mingo. There is this one quilt artwork that was blessed by Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1965, the same year that the Freedom March took place. It has these incredibly vivid colors and is really quite beautiful. I only saw digital images of it before deciding to acquire the work, but it has not disappointed in any way. It's just so gorgeous, and there is so much history embedded within it that it has become really important to me. Since then, we've been acquiring quilts by Mary Lee Bendolph, along with other Gee's Bend quilters, as well.



Lucy Mingo's Freedom Quilting Bee: 'Pattern to Joseph's Coat' (1965). Courtesy Nicelle Beauchene Gallery and the Komal Shah & Gaurav Garg Collection

Jacoba Urist: You mentioned that you only saw an image of the quilt before ultimately deciding to buy it. I'm curious, with your tech expertise, what's your take on online viewing rooms?

Komal Shah: It's both positive and negative. There's no substitute for viewing art in person, and the online experience is often quite a poor simulation of visiting the real thing. Going forward, the art world clearly needs to develop a different online viewing system, because right now they're essentially collections of JPEGs. For example, only a few computers have color match, so the colors you are viewing are likely only 70 to 80 percent accurate. But if you've seen the work before or you know the artist well, you can take a leap of faith.

With that said, from a broader perspective, I'm very happy about the overall democratization of art buying. The more avenues, the better. The artworld is an insular economy. I'm sure I'm going to hurt some feelings when I say this, but it's difficult and intimidating for a newcomer to navigate the artworld. I try to help as many new collectors as I can with introductions and support, but the market is often controlled by a handful of power-brokers. If artwork becomes more easily available through channels like OVRs, I think that's an important step in the right direction for both artists and collectors.

Jacoba Urist: Can you see yourself adding NFTs to your collection at any point?

Komal Shah: Honestly, I'm still forming my opinion of NFTs. Unfortunately, with all the craziness around what's happening in the auction market, I'm very wary of NFTs. But I do think that there are some important uses for NFTs that I'm hoping will become clearer once the dust settles.

There is an amazing artist, who I won't name, who has three young daughters and wanted to create a royalty structure for her artwork so that her children could continue to benefit from their resales long after she's gone. In talking to her galleries, I realized that, theoretically, if there were an NFT infrastructure for her artwork, that could be a great solution for this artist's family to continue to benefit from her hard work many years down the road. The artworld still doesn't have a VC-type model where investment decisions are made based on risk and valuation. I hope that changes in the not-too-distant future.

Jacoba Urist: For as long as I can remember, people have said that Silicon Valley and people in tech haven't necessarily been known to embrace the artworld as much as other communities. Where do you think that unfortunate trope originated that the tech world doesn't take art that seriously?

Komal Shah: Several points come to mind on this topic. First, there are many great collectors in Silicon Valley. They just don't like to talk about their collections. This is a community where you see billionaire founders wearing shorts and driving old, beat-up cars. Wealthy people here can dress in the simplest clothes, and you wouldn't know they had any money at all. That really is the culture here. We don't tend to talk about

our assets as much as people in other places do. So, to start, I think the artworld doesn't really get the full picture of what's going on in Silicon Valley.

However, I do think that there is a bias against art that exists within the tech community. People here see it as a frivolous endeavor when contrasted with spending money towards things that "make a difference." Many prominent philanthropists in the Bay Area and Silicon Valley put money towards education and health, and support poverty eradication in countries across the globe. For them, I think those issues are seen as more substantive and urgent than art. And remember, Silicon Valley is also only about fifty years old. There's been a lot more wealth concentration over time in cities like New York and Chicago. So, we haven't matured as much as other art centers.

That's one of the critical aspects that led me to start the 'Artists on the Future' conversation series at Stanford where we've featured six artists so far over the last two years: Shirin Neshat, Teresita Fernandez, Njedka Akunyili Crosby, Lynda Benglis, Lorna Simpson, and Dana Schutz. The first year we were on campus we were able to get 500 people to attend each of the talks in person, and it was a wonderful mix of students, alumni, and the broader community. We have tried to keep the focus on the dialogue between art and society; how art can stir broader conversations on topics like the political landscape and the border debate, rather than focusing on the process of putting paint on canvas. This year, because of the pandemic, we were online, and each conversation had about 6,000 views. So, while we don't have as many galleries or museums as other cities, there's clearly a strong appetite for art here in the Bay Area. It just has to be managed effectively. It's only a matter of time.



Jordan Casteel's 'Cansuela' (2019). Oil on canvas, 78 X 90 inches. Courtesy Casey Kaplan Gallery and the Komal Shah & Gaurav Garg Collection.



Jadé Fadojutimi's 'Inside My Shell' (2018). Courtesy Pippi Houldsworth Gallery and the Komal Shah & Gaurav Garg Collection

Jacoba Urist: Has there ever been an artwork that got away, something you initially passed on that still haunts you to this day?

Actually in 1999, long before I started collecting art, right after my husband and I got married, we visited a gallery somewhere in Manhattan close to the Four Seasons Hotel. We asked the concierge where we could go to look at great art, and he sent us to this gallery. My husband and I were absolutely drooling over the work. We asked the price of a work and they said \$250,000. They were kind of looking down on us and we couldn't imagine buying art for that kind of money, so we walked away. It was a de Kooning.

Jacoba Urist: You're quite far from this issue at your age, but have you given any thoughts to the legacy of your collection after you're gone?

I've actually given it a lot of thought. Since I turned 50 a year ago, legacy has become an important part of my mindset. We have over 110 female artists in our collection, and I do think it's a singularly unique historical narrative and experience which needs to be kept and seen together. The connections between the various works and artists, as well as their individual stories, are very important to me. Whether our collection ultimately becomes part of a museum or forms the basis for our own private foundation, I would like to focus on scholarship around these artists and help make sure that they are inducted into the canon of art history. I would really love for young women (and men, for that matter,) to grow up learning about these artists—their practice, their personal stories, and their sheer perseverance. To me, that's my job. That's going to be my legacy. During the time we've been collecting, many of the artists in our collection have passed away. I want to capture as much of the artists' ethos as I can for those who remain with us. ■