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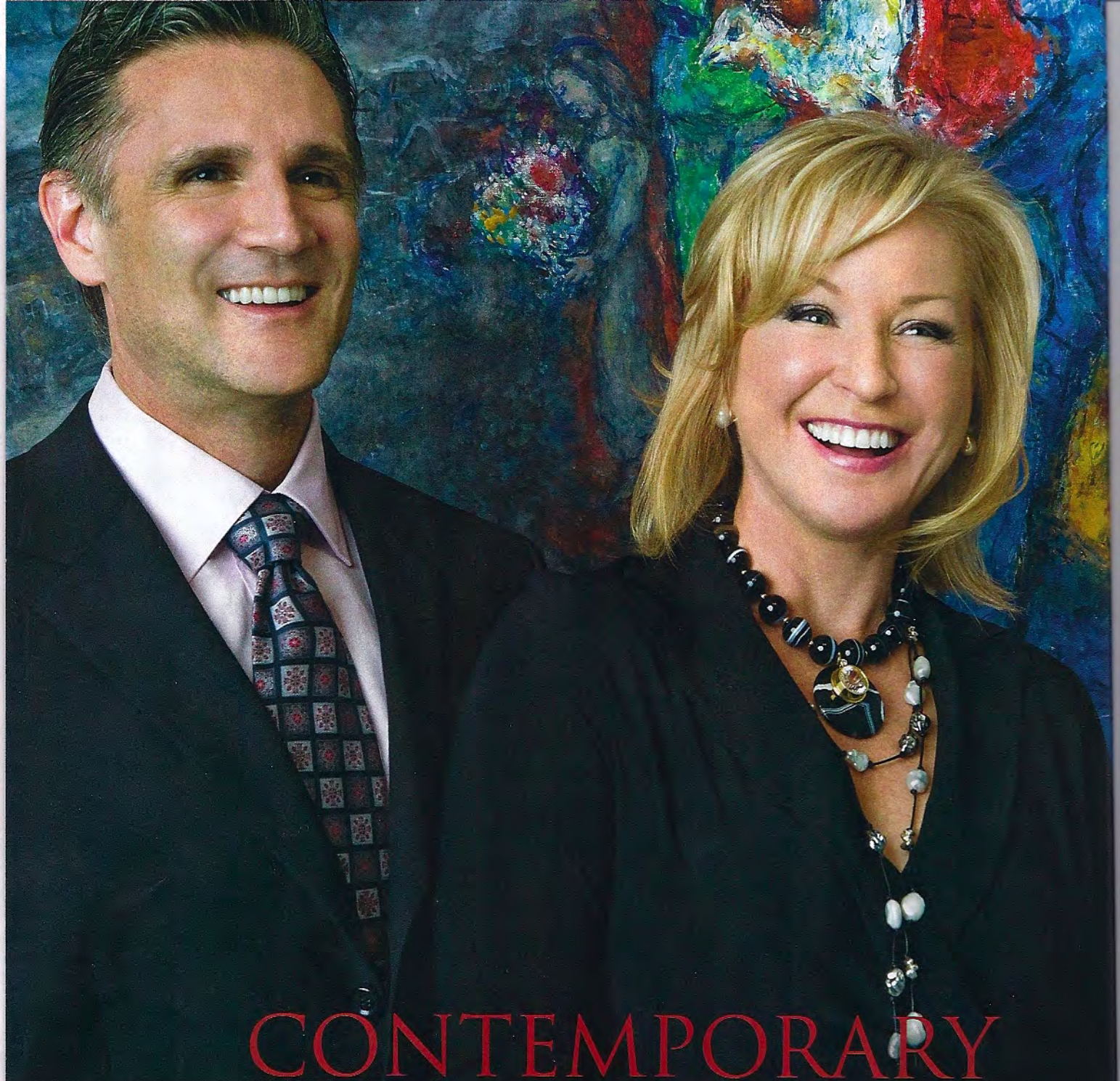
CELEBRATING THE LIFESTYLE & COMMUNITY OF PALM DESERT



21st CENTURY ART EXPLODES IN PALM DESERT

Five galleries lead the way

James Carona and
Heather Sacre, owners of
Heather James Fine Art,
with curator Chip Tom



CONTEMPORARY ART CENTRAL

BY BRANE JEVRIC

In one bold sweep, in one spectacular night, five galleries lead the way in making the Palm Desert area one of Southern California's top destinations for serious contemporary art collectors.



Jim Carona and Heather Sacre, owners of Heather James Fine Art. Photo by Taili Song Roth.

Imagine an evening here in the desert when an art walk invites participants into the presence of premier works by Warhol and Basquiat, Chagall and Picasso. You'd expect it in New York or Los Angeles, but in Palm Desert?

Actually, for some time now, Palm Desert has been a mecca for remarkable art shows, a regional epicenter of fine art sales. And on November 29, in Palm Desert and vicinity, five notable galleries are kicking off a spectacular season of contemporary art exhibits. If you're already appreciative of the genre, you'll be in your element. If it's something you've yet to discover, come broaden your experience and expand your knowledge.

HEATHER JAMES FINE ART

The impressive, 8,500-square-foot building dominates the corner of Hwy 111 and Portola, with "Skywatcher," a huge yellow sculpture by Rotraut, erected in front of it. This is the site of yet another Heather James gallery besides the one on El Pasco (and one more in Laguna Beach). The proud owners are husband and wife James (Jim) Carona and Heather Sacre, whose combined name identifies their local gallery empire.

Jim Carona is a bit of a maverick. A former investment banker, he is not afraid of taking risks or dealing at the very top levels in the high-stakes art world. Sitting in his new office, Carona shares the story of the building's acquisition: "I purchased the building from an owner who did not want to sell it at first, but rather would rent it. The building was his retirement. I persisted and got it."

Buying such a property when the real estate market is in a tailspin and the economy is in turmoil definitely sounds like a bold move, but Carona took the long view: "I really wanted this space for the gallery, and I wanted to own it. I knew what it can be and what we can do with it."

For the gallery's first exhibit, the couple turned to renowned L.A.-based independent curator Chip Tom. With more than 20 years working in contemporary art, organizing exhibitions at museums in Geneva and Lausanne, as well as curating shows for prominent galleries in Chicago, Los Angeles and Santa Barbara, Tom also serves as the director of the Center for Contemporary Culture in Seoul, Korea.

For this opening, he has curated seven mini-exhibitions, which feature top-quality pieces for a wide range of tastes: Impressionist and Modern, Post-War and Contemporary, American, Latin American, Old Master, Photography and Design. It was Tom's artistic vision that paired sometime-collaborators Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat—two New York artists who were friends but from different generations—together in one show.



Photo: Brane Jevric

Among the Impressionist offerings, the gallery is presenting a giant landscape entitled "Bords du Loing à Moret" by French painter Francis Picabia. "The painting was done in 1904," says Tom. "Picabia was a very young man when he did this painting, and then he moved on to the abstract surrealism of Dadaism. It's one of the largest Impressionist paintings outside of a museum collection. The asking price is about \$2.5 million."

Among the most expensive artworks shown will be the works of Chagall, Monet, Modigliani and Picasso. The prices for their paintings will range from \$4 million to \$7 million.

Tom's innovative spirit has also brought some design icons into the mix, such as the aluminum chairs by 1930s Los Angeles furniture maker Warren McArthur, a man who was once commissioned by Howard Hughes for his aviation projects.

And the final touch, according to the gallery's director Kimberly Nichols, is the bold move of including newer talents such as the 27-year old Canadian painter Krisjanis Kaktins Gorsline. Judging by the accolades, his work will look right at home alongside the masters on November 29.

THE HART GALLERY

Eva Hart moved to the United States 45 years ago. The Austrian-born, petite blonde is the main anchor of the 5,000-square-foot gallery on El Paseo that she owns with her husband Ed. But in fact, the entire family has been in the art business for decades. Eva Hart's sister and brother-in-law are the curators of The Hart Gallery, and her nephew, Christian Hohmann, is the director.

"We used to own galleries in Chicago and Carmel, but it was too much traveling and I decided to consolidate all the forces here," says Hart. "Once I lived in the desert for a while, I did not want to go

anywhere else anymore. Our main goal is to become art consultants to our patrons for life, and to develop a relationship based on trust."

The Hart Gallery opened in Palm Desert on November 1, 2002. Last year it was extensively expanded, so that today, it has become a landmark that's hard to miss; the gallery's extravagant glass entrance dominates the first portion of El Paseo's west end.

"It is our philosophy to help our clients integrate new art with their existing collection," says gallery director Hohmann, "and to assist in proper placement of the art to achieve that magical balance and harmony that transform a house into a home with character and spirit."

In that vein, on November 29 The Hart Gallery will present exhibitions by two Californian artists: Neil Nagy, a representative of the Bay Area Figurative Movement, and jd hansen, a sculptor from Orange County. Nagy draws his inspiration from ancient Chinese and Mayan cultures and contemporary figurative art, while jd hansen's work is deep, intuitive and mature, despite her youth.

IMAGO GALLERIES AND STUDIO

The subject of an exquisite 2007 lithograph by famed artist Mel Ramos (who did a similar one the year before of actress Uma Thurman), Leisa Austin is the driving force behind the success of the galleries that she and her husband David own in Palm Desert. One fan is Milton Esterow, the legendary editor and publisher of ARTnews (America's oldest art magazine and the world's largest). Yet Leisa Austin is quick to give full credit for the gallery's growth to her spouse. "David and I have been working together in the art business since 1986," she says. "We opened Imago Galleries in Palm Desert 17 years ago." One asset was the couple's astute sense of timing. "The desert seemed ripe for a new gallery, as Elaine Horwich was leaving town," she says.

Today, besides the well-established Imago Galleries, the Austins



Ginny Ruffner, Aquarium Garden with a Tsunami Hat
2008, glass with mixed media, 15 x 22 x 7 inches.