

INTERIOR DESIGNER

# A CONVERSATION WITH GEORGE BILLIS:

Artist, Collector, Galleriest and Connoisseur

*By Eric Cohler*

*Photography by Francis Smith*



In the front hall at left, two mixed media on canvas by Brian Novatny; at right, *Life and Times of a Slave Girl* by Tim Rollins.



George Billis is that rare combination of passionate collector and art dealer which, when shaken gently, yields a generosity of spirit and a Renaissance man. I caught up with George while he was about to fly off to his gallery in Los Angeles for an opening of Russ Harvard's work. George is bicoastal with galleries in Both LA and New York featuring American and international living artists and sculptors. Looking at his website, I was taken with the breadth and range of the artists that he represents. These are artists working in many mediums that actually complement one another—albeit in unexpected ways—and this is what gives the diversity of George's gallery such positive tension.

**Eric Cohler:** George, how long have you been an art dealer?

**George Billis:** Many years, but the actual physical gallery business is 13 years old. I started in New York and opened in LA several years later. As an art dealer, I firmly believe that it's paramount to represent artists that I myself collect and believe in.



Gallery owner and collector George Billis, pictured here in cork ottoman with side table by Daniel Michalik, with ceramics by Hayne Bayless to his right and an etching by Louise Bourgeois above.



At right, a painting by Matt Jacobs; above the Frank Gehry chair and ottoman beside the staircase, a painting (and handmade frame) by David Jakim.



In the upstairs hall, an acrylic on panel by Andrew Haines, titled *Old Snow on the Edge of Town*. Etching at right by Elizabeth Murray.

**EC:** What was the impetus for opening on the West Coast?

**GB:** It was a dream. I had wanted to open a gallery in California for years, as I also have a client base there. The gallery was a logical extension and is quite successful.

**EC:** That's terrific. How did you get started as an art dealer?

**GB:** I trained as a printmaker and ceramicist at Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh and began collecting while an undergraduate. Of course, I started small and collected ceramic pieces that were affordable as well as beautiful.

**EC:** Your own home is filled with these pieces as well as paintings and sculpture...

**GB:** Yes, I practice what I preach.

**EC:** That's refreshing.

**GB:** It's honest and heartfelt.

**EC:** What is your gallery's primary focus?

**GB:** Works by young emerging artists and established artists. I also deal in prints.

**EC:** Are the prints secondary market material?

**GB:** Yes, for the most part—artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Ross Bleckner and Kiki Smith.

**EC:** Not too shabby.

**GB:** (Laughs) I try...

**EC:** You succeed. Is this a good time to buy art? Especially emerging artists?

**GB:** This is a fantastic time. There are opportunities in the art market that were simply nonexistent a year or two ago. And while prices may be a bit lower, I want to emphasize that it's falling in love with the art that matters most, even more so than price.

**EC:** Point taken.

**GB:** Buying art, making that commitment is akin to becoming a patron today.

**EC:** In the tradition of the Medicis and all great patrons of the arts.

**GB:** In a small way, exactly.

**EC:** It makes collecting that much more dynamic.





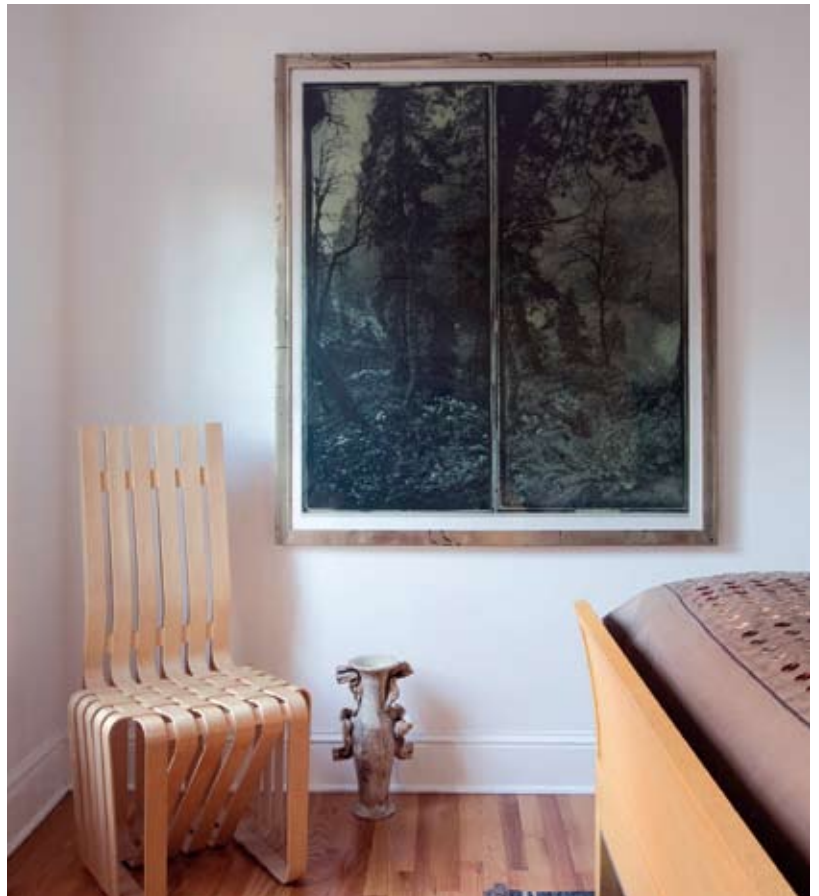
In the dining room, *Arte Pasta* by Stephen Magsig, and in the living room, an etching on paper by Louise Bourgeois.



Over the bed, watercolor oceanscapes by Richard Orient and, at right, mixed media on panel by Brian Novatny.

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—*George Billis*



A photogravure by Judy Pfaff; ceramic below by Alice Federico.



In the living room, a Ross Bleckner etching, a Kenny Scharf flower vase, and *Lucille Ball*, a photograph by Cindy Sherman. The cork ottoman is by Daniel Michalik.



In the kitchen, a ceramic by Haynes Baylis; paintings by Tom Gregg. The Knoll table and chairs are by Frank Gehry.

**GB:** And exciting.

**EC:** Where do you see the art market headed?

**GB:** It will probably stay relatively level, and again, buying for the long term is what matters. Put your heart into the purchase.

**EC:** That passion is what I hear again and again from true collectors. I couldn't agree more.

**GB:** It's a constant in an otherwise unsure world.

**EC:** And pricing—is it possible to find anything of merit for under \$1,000?

**GB:** You can find remarkably fine ceramics for \$500 or less. The artists that I represent have been together for years; some of them

went to school with me. We're a tight-knit group. My advice is for collectors to buy a couple of things at a time. Stumble on artists and art during your travels, go to art fairs and gallery openings, and finally, find a home for the art that makes you smile. I believe that there is real value in small works, pieces that can be displayed on tablescares, for example.

**EC:** In other words, do your homework but don't over-analyze.

**GB:** Yes. Concentrate on the love of collecting for love's sake. Let the process unfold.

**EC:** I take it you believe in magic.

**GB:** ...In the "magic" of art and of living with beauty. To wake up each morning and be delighted to see a work is a sublime pleasure.

**EC:** A pleasure that you, George Billis, certainly know the art of enjoying.

**GB:** One that I hope to share with others! ●

*Eric Cobler, president of Eric Cobler Inc., holds a master's degree in Historic Preservation from the Columbia School of Architecture. He won a Designer of the Year Award in 1998, and in 2000 the D&D Building in New York recognized him as one of the 26 leading designers in the U.S. Eric has appeared on CBS Morning and Evening News and CNN Style and he is a featured designer on the Home & Garden TV Network.*

