

One of a Kind

Christie's print specialist Cary Leibowitz brings to his position the passion of a collector and the healthy skepticism of an artist

While being graciously attentive to the visitors at the busy preview for Christie's recent Prints and Multiples auction, Cary Leibowitz, who joined as a print specialist in 2000, managed to point out to me some unusual and interesting works on view in the main gallery. The first was lodged so high on the wall that it would have escaped my notice had he not motioned toward it: Alan Belcher's *Cat-sup* (1990), an actual leopard pelt with laminated Cibachromes of ketchup collaged on top. He has had his eye on it for a particular client, he said. Then, he drew my attention to a print that was closer to eye level, one of Andy Warhol's electric chairs—a personal favorite, and at an estimated \$3,500–4,500, a startling example of how (relatively) inexpensive some prints can be at auction. The visit was my first of several introductions to Leibowitz's smart, highly developed, and idiosyncratically refined taste. With a bushy beard and a distinguishing wardrobe of plaid shirts and ties that tread the line between campy and preppy, he's an unlikely character to find working the floor of one of the world's major auction houses. And yet he brings a range of experience and a freshness of vision to his position that few can match.

Leibowitz is perhaps better known outside Christie's as an artist active in the New York contemporary art world. Since the early 1980s, he has exhibited—under his name and the pseudonym “Candyass”—in galleries and museums in the United States, Europe, and Japan. He works extensively with multiples, but they aren't the kind of rarefied objects you might find coming up for auction at Christie's. His

Original Defeatist Socks are purple tube socks with rubber non-slip text printed on the sole: “I can't do this” on one, and “I can't do that” on the other. Often self-mocking (as in the *Whiney Asshole* pink porcelain plate emblazoned with handwritten confessions such as “I am superficial” and “I don't deserve anything I have”), his multiples also seem to thumb their nose at the conventions of making, buying, and selling art. In a recent exhibi-

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tion at Andrew Kreps gallery, he showed a group of multiples stacked in the middle of the floor. These were either trash cans or umbrella stands, depending on what the buyer wanted, and were priced at two dollars for a trash can or four for an umbrella stand, even though they are identical pieces. Pricing the work so cheaply is at once a challenge to the market, which requires much more highly valued art objects in order to sustain itself, and a challenge to a buyer: Does it cheapen the art-buying experience to buy a two-dollar trash can in a gallery? Does the collector feel greater satisfaction if it's an umbrella stand? These are questions which, despite their apparent absurdity, are part and parcel of auction-house culture.

It was not Leibowitz's life as an artist,

however, that drew him to become an auction-house specialist, but rather his experience as a collector. Prints and multiples form only a fraction of the vast conglomeration of stuff that lines the floors, walls, staircases, and every inch of other available space in his Harlem brownstone, already the subject of several marveling articles in interior-design magazines. No description can do justice to the intensity, density, and sheer visual pleasure of the collection that

has been growing all around him for more than a decade. Oversize glass liquor bottles and giant tin cans of Campbell's soup share space in a Budweiser-beer-wallpapered room with Robert Venturi chairs and a spaghetti print by James Rosenquist. The stairwell leading to the upper rooms is crowded with portraits, which inhabit the space like some kind of amalgamated family: the dumpy woman on a poster for a Duane Hanson show looks balefully over at Cindy Sherman in a wig photographed by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders; a press photo of Liza Minelli at ankle level cozies up to Vik Muniz's wedding announcement card; a giant Warhol print of Robert Mapplethorpe stares mesmerizingly at those walking downstairs.

Leibowitz has a rare understanding of



Cary Leibowitz with the "Four of Cups" during a Tarot Card reading in the mid-1990s. Photo: Vik Muniz. Courtesy of Cary Leibowitz

the various roles that artists, sellers, and buyers play in the art market. He has first hand familiarity with the passion that drives certain people to collect, and is extremely knowledgeable about contemporary art. Moreover, he is highly attuned to

the manner in which artworks acquire value in the marketplace. His enthusiasm as a collector and skepticism as an artist are two sides of the same coin. And the value of *that* coin is indisputable. ■