

HER BREAD AND BUTTER

London-based Italian philanthropist Valeria Napoleone has been dedicated to collecting and promoting exclusively female contemporary artists for almost 20 years. With nearly three hundred works to her name, she is recognised as one of Britain's leading collectors of contemporary art. Lara Monro visited this imaginative collector at her Kensington home and found it filled not just with art, but with an air of progress.



Clockwise, starting with soft sculpture on sofa:
Julie Verhoeven, *Comfort Blanket*, 2015
Francis Upritchard, *Warm Table*, 2011
Berta Fischer, *Hulenays*, 2011
Judith Bernstein, *Screw 1*, 2014
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GROWING UP IN NORTHERN ITALY, Valeria Napoleone was surrounded with the rituals of collecting courtesy of her parents' love of antiques. Yet it wasn't until undertaking a Masters degree in Art Gallery Administration at The Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, that she began to form her own tastes. During her time there, in the late 1980s and '90s, Napoleone met a number of prominent artists who would go on to influence her direction within the contemporary art world – not least, the Guerilla Girls, whose focus was on challenging and exposing sexism and racism in the visual arts. Things have recently come full circle, as Napoleone is the lead patron of the Guerilla Girls current show at the Whitechapel.

In addition to managing and fronting her transatlantic projects, Valeria XX SculptureCenter (New York) and Valeria XX Contemporary Art Society (UK), Napoleone sits on the board of a number of established organisations, including The Fashion Arts Foundation of the British Fashion Council and the Institute of Fine Arts in NYC. She is also Head of the Development Committee at Studio Voltaire, an intergenerational programme offering an alternative space for the production of artworks from commercial galleries and institutions.

Amidst her hectic schedule Napoleone kindly found time to invite me to her home to discuss her collection, her investment in promoting new ideas and to explain why this is her, as she puts it, “bread and butter.”

Since moving to London with her family in 1999, Napoleone's Kensington Palace Gardens flat has become almost a museum in itself, as it is filled with a selection of works from her collection. She has taken an imaginative approach to installing the works, mixing conventional ‘paintings on walls’ around prominently placed sculpture and artist-designed furniture. Take for instance the grand sitting room, where a large, softly-coloured wall drawing by artist Lily van der Stokker has been paired nicely with a remake of Judith Bernstein's bold, expressive and phallic ‘Birth of the Universe’ charcoal drawing series from the 1960s. While Napoleone's home brims with her collection, many of the works are also frequently loaned to international museums and institutions – Anthea Hamilton's recent *Project for a Door* Turner Prize installation, for example. Napoleone sees this as a way of avoiding having work sitting in storage for too long, while also giving insight into her personal taste.



Sculpture: Nina Canell, *Endless Column (Alternating Current for Twelve Electric fans)*, 2009
Lily van der Stokker Table
Painting: Lisa Yuskavage, *True Blonde*, 1998

Sculpture: Ida Ekblad, *Game*, 2010
 Wall Painting: Lily van der Stokker,
100% Stupid, 1991
 Vases by Gaetano Pesce

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Starting, topically, with her generous support of the current Whitechapel exhibition *Guerrilla Girls: Is it even worse in Europe?*, Napoleone explains her patronage with typical zeal. “How could I say no? I started collecting in the ’90s when they were quite active, and I loved the ’90s, they were such a magical moment... The exhibition is a positive reflection on the approach [Whitechapel Director] Iwona [Blazwick] is taking to change up the art world.”

Since her appointment at the Whitechapel Gallery in 2001, Iwona Blazwick has indeed shown relentless determination in promoting women as role models within the arts. Napoleone observes the forward thinking attitudes of figures such as Blazwick and Frances Morris (the first female Director of Tate Modern) as reflecting the UK’s relatively liberal attitudes and progressiveness in the arts. “We can see here the beginning of an exciting journey” she explains. “If you look at London, we have a lot of great women directors of incredible institutions, like Morris and Blazwick; they are breaking the glass ceilings of our hierarchical art institutions.”

Having lived in both New York and London, Napoleone is invested in both cities’ art scenes. She appreciates London, she tells me, for its rather open-minded attitudes, crediting its acceptance of eccentricity, individuality and extravagance. The United States, she feels, while progressive in some senses, has a more conservative approach to the art world and market. “I think London is leading this discussion. The United States are so far behind. There is a real tension. The UK is looking ahead of Europe, where everything seems a little dormant, and in the USA, where everything is moving ahead but is very conservative.”

It seems that, regardless of her nostalgic connection to New York, Napoleone dislikes the systems that have been implemented; she finds them too fixed. “If you are an artist, you are either automatically categorised as a painter or a sculptor, for example.” This idea of being pigeon-holed goes against everything Napoleone

stands for. “I find it difficult, the way they categorise you into boxes. I am not [like] that. You cannot package me or what I do. OK, you can say I am collector of female artists, but I am not *just* a collector of female artists. It is so important to not overlook the individual if they merit recognition, if they are unique. We need to embrace the individuals who are consciously fighting against the conventions that have been implemented by the dominant art world.”

This insightful and unique understanding of how we should be readdressing attitudes towards diversity and equality is very much the product of the time Napoleone has dedicated to fostering important connections with artists. As a sort of natural progression, Napoleone has launched and spearheaded two new projects, Valeria XX SculptureCenter and Valeria XX Contemporary

Art Society. Inspired by the SculptureCenter’s aim to support artist research as well as experimental and compelling sculptural practices of both emerging and established contemporary artists, Napoleone teamed up with the organisation to run and sponsor an annual commission-based project. The inaugural selection of British sculptor Anthea Hamilton reflects the commission’s determination to step out from the mainstream, Napoleone explains. “I admired Anthea’s courage to leave the gallery and be by herself... to step away from the commercial side of the art world, and I admire SculptureCenter for having the courage to show her work. This is what collaborations should be about.”

Prior to the commission, Hamilton spoke with Napoleone about her keen interest in the radicalism and experimentation of

’60s and ’70s creativity, mentioning the influence architect and designer Gaetano Pesce has had on her practice. From this, Napoleone saw an opportunity to connect two individuals who ultimately resist being categorised. “You can’t package Anthea or Pesce. I picked up the phone and organised for them to meet and that was it,” she explains. This partnership and its end result reinstate the power of collaboration. Since her commission last year, Anthea has been nominated for the Turner Prize, and a remake of her installation, *Project for a Door (After Gaetano Pesce)* 2015, is currently on show at Tate Britain.

While the American project is commission-based, in the United Kingdom, Valeria XX Contemporary Art Society will donate one major work purchased by the scheme to a different art es-



Painting: Elaine Lustig Cohen,
Untitled, 1969
 Ceramics: Ettore Sottsass
 © Mariona Otero



establishment across the UK every year. In order to secure the acquisition, each museum will have to address the representation of female artists within their existing collection. With this venture, Valeria aims to home in on the crucial necessity of funding, looking at all of the different regions in the UK that have been greatly affected by government cuts. Furthermore, she hopes these alternative approaches will be a catalyst for encouraging new attitudes towards bringing the private and public sectors together. “By supporting regional museums and entering into the public sphere as a private collector, it allows individuals who have since now rarely crossed paths to pick one another’s brains,” Napoleone explains.

XX Contemporary Art Society should also be acknowledged for its educational value. It will allow communities and individuals from regions that are less exposed than others to contemporary art an opportunity to engage with it.

Ultimately, yes, Napoleone is a private collector, however, her motivations are quite alternative to the traditional preconceptions associated with the notion of an art collector. For her, collecting is not just about accumulating works and focusing on the monetary value or credibility of each artist. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Napoleone invests in artists in order to foster relationships with them, to help understand their practice so that subsequently they can progress in a direction that is naturally suited to them. She is far more interested in being part of the process. “I could give a cheque, but I don’t want to do that” she tells me, before explaining; “I want to meet the artist, I want to discuss with them what they have in mind, what is their ambition. This process is so important.”

Of course, selling work is important to artists, as is being part of an ‘important’ collection, yet what is refreshing is Napoleone’s genuine belief in the power of ideas, communication and partnerships. “We want to grow the next generation of collectors who are invested and dedicated, I hope they will look at what I am doing

and see that they can also do the same. This idea of sharing is so important. Everyone would benefit: the museums, the public, the collector, the artist... especially the artist! It is a plus for everybody. Like everything, like with the support of women artists, it is this ripple effect... and collaboration helps.”

We can now see the relationship between the private and public realms strengthening as individuals such as Napoleone enforce the benefits that can come from collaborations between the two sectors. Let’s hope figures with fierce drive, like Napoleone, will encourage the next generation of art professionals and enthusiasts to rethink their attitudes and approaches towards the contemporary art world. She is a powerful role model and dedicated patron whose advocacy for embracing diversity and change is inspiring. “When you know you make a difference, an impact, it is addictive. It tastes great. I cannot just shut the doors and say I am collecting art and staying at home. It is important, it takes over my life, this type of connecting and engagement.”