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'It was the first in the waterfall series. I struggled toward it, and suddenly it was there in my studio. It was a real breakthough. So I kept it'
—*Pat Steir*

The reasons that artists keep examples of their own work range from accident to serendipity to—in a few cases—good planning

LOOKING AFTER THEIR OWN

BY SUSAN EMERLING

One of the pleasures of viewing an artist's museum show and leafing through the exhibition catalogue is discovering which of the works were lent directly by the artist. But what exactly do these works reveal to us? Are they sentimental favorites? Pieces that didn't sell? Do they reflect an economic decision to hold on to early work?

Why, for example, did Frank Stella choose to keep *Delta*, a black painting from 1958 with asymmetrical stripes and a red background?

"It was the beginning of the black paintings," says Stella, 69. "There was one of the banded landscape paintings underneath, and I gradually painted out the landscape in black because it didn't work. When I got it all painted out, I thought, 'That's interesting,' and I decided with my next paintings to forgo the underpainting and start with the black. Then I assembled a body of work and put together a show." *Delta* was left behind in the studio, and so, by default, became part of the artist's collection.

Though many artists accumulate work in a similarly random fashion, some make a concerted effort to keep certain pieces. Pat Steir keeps all of her "inconvenient" paintings—those more than 14 feet high—that she feels position the viewer in the middle of a life-size landscape. She also tries to

Pat Steir's *Sixteen Waterfalls of Dreams, Memories, and Sentiment*, 1990, was the inaugural piece in a series composed entirely of thrown paint.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

Jim Dine painted ***Eden Park, July 1946*** when he was eleven years old.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PACE/WILDENSTEIN, NEW YORK

hold on to works that signal a transition from one style or method of working to another. "I want to own the key paintings," says Steir, 65, whose work has shifted in the course of three decades from paintings laden with narrative to semiabstract pictures of waves and waterfalls in which the paint is carefully thrown from the brush onto the canvas. One piece she kept, *Sixteen Waterfalls of Dreams, Memories, and Sentiment* (1990), inaugurated her series of black-and-white canvases composed entirely of thrown paint. "It was the first in the waterfall series," says Steir. "I struggled toward it, and suddenly it was there in my studio. It was a real breakthough. So I kept it. And I secured the keeping of it by giving it to my husband. I've made the mistake of selling paintings that were iconic in my personal development, not knowing what they meant to me."

Other artists safeguard works that have personal significance. Jim Dine closely guards a work of juvenilia, a small landscape on paper of trolley tracks running through the woods in his native Cincinnati, painted when he was eleven years old.

"I was always going to be an artist," says Dine, now 69. "In the summer of 1946, my mother sent me to the Art Museum of Cincinnati for children's classes. We would paint from nature around the museum, in Eden Park, which was a beautiful wooded area, where the trolley lines ran through. We used cheap poster paint, and I didn't keep anything but this. It has a sense of French painting, though I had no idea of that at the time. I brought it home, and my mother folded it to get it into a frame. She died the next year, and I took it out of the frame and kept it. It's kind of a living memory of my mother." Dine keeps the painting facing the wall between his bedroom and bathroom. "I turn it around about every day, and a flood of memories comes back," he says. "It has been a talisman for me, reaffirming that this is what I was put here for."

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Francesco Clemente, 53, also keeps some of his earliest works—drawings he made in his early 20s—because of their importance to his nascent artistic production. "I spent a number of years just drawing," says Clemente. "All through the early '70s, I lived in a small apartment in Rome, with a one-foot-high pile of drawings on the floor. That was a great time of accumulation, when I was attempting to articulate a way of thinking." When Clemente moved to New York in 1980, he packed up the drawings and brought them with him. "They were like charms," he says. "They didn't have a di-

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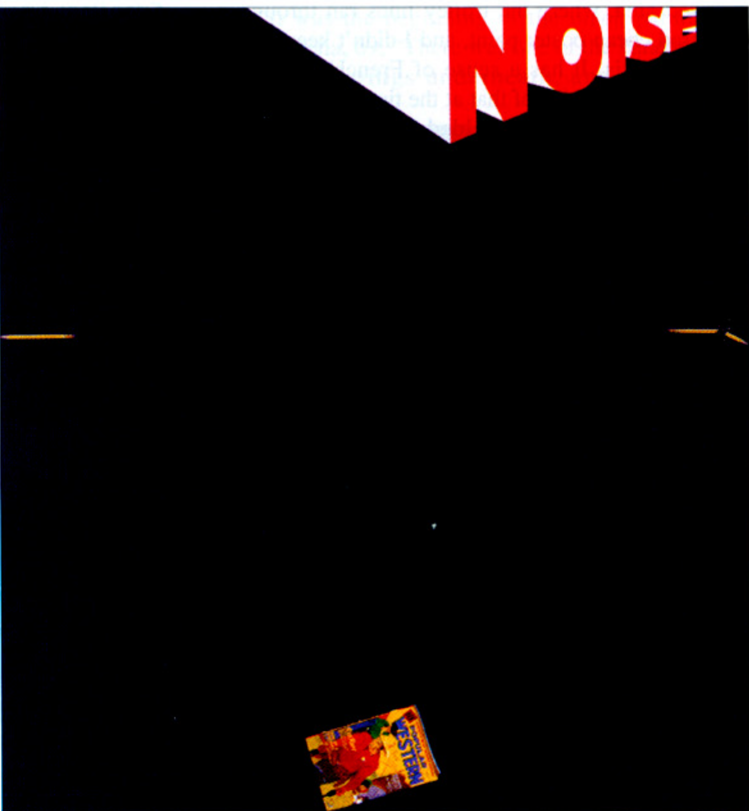
'I'm not always the best judge of what to save. I wish I'd kept some of my better-known works. I weep over that' –Ed Ruscha

rect functional use for me, but they represented an accumulation of power."

Janine Antoni, 41, is also very conscious of how her creations enter the world. "Maybe it's my inability to separate, which is part of the content of the work," she says. To stay connected to certain pieces, Antoni continues working on them long after they have been placed in collections. The performance and installation piece *Slumber*, begun in 1994, involves Antoni recording her rapid eye movements on a polysomnograph. During the performance, she weaves on a loom the resulting graphic pattern with strips of her nightgown into an ever-growing blanket (currently 120 feet long). She sleeps under the blanket on a bed in the gallery. *Slumber* now belongs to the Greek collector Dakis Joannou, but each time it is exhibited, Antoni travels to where the work is, records new dreams, and picks up weaving where she left off. Another piece, *Moor*, is a 2-inch-thick, 280-foot-long, multicolored rope that Antoni began braiding in 2001 from fabrics donated by friends and colleagues. When it was sold to the Stockholm Kunsthalle Magasin 3, Antoni stipulated that she could continue to add to the rope and display it in any context she chose.

"What's painful is not only the selling but the brutality of letting something go," says Antoni. "With *Slumber* I keep weaving. With *Moor* I keep adding to it. The whole process can continue even though the piece is sold."

Like many artists, Antoni also keeps one of every multiple she makes. Because she works with organic materials, the versions are not always identical. "I will choose one to keep that has the best relationship with other work," she says. "I want to have the flexibility to always have whatever is most appropriate for a particular show or context."



***Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western*, 1963, tops the list of pieces Ed Ruscha wishes he had kept.**

KATHERINE WETZEL/©VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, RICHMOND

Deliberately choosing to keep valuable works of art is usually the luxury of an artist whose work is already selling. For an artist at the beginning of a career, who has been struggling to get by, the rush of selling can be so thrilling—and the money so needed—that the allure of holding on to art pales in comparison.

"My father always said, 'You must keep work,'" says painter Cecily Brown, 36, referring to the advice she received early in her career from the late English art historian and critic David Sylvester. "It was enormously flattering because he was assuming I'd even have a choice." Initially Brown ignored her father's advice. "I was in New York for five years before I had a show," she says. "Then, as soon as I had one, I sold everything. It was so shocking that I just wanted to get it out there."

After that exhibition, at Deitch Projects in 1997, Brown had a short burst of exhibitions. In 2000 she decided to start keeping work. The first painting she held on to was *Performance* (2000). "I had just finished the last painting for my first show with Gagosian in SoHo," explains Brown. "The paintings had sexual imagery that was very fragmented and fractured. I painted *Performance* in reaction to that. It showed these two very clear figures having sex. I was completely terrified about doing the show at Gagosian, and this painting was made in a great sigh of relief. I kept it because I knew it was going to be the only one like that."

Brown now keeps one or two finished paintings a year. "Sometimes there's a painting that stands out, and I know that that's the one I want," she says. "Unfortunately that's also the same one that everybody else wants. Obviously if it was between me and the Whitney Museum, I'd probably let the museum take it. I also have tons of paintings that I've either painted too far or never finished. I want to keep some of the finished pieces because I don't want to be left with just the failed ones."

Ed Ruscha's career also got off to a slow start. "Ninety percent of my work went unsold for 15 to 20 years," says Ruscha, 67. "I could say I was the consummate 'collector' of my own work." Once the art was selling, however, he tried to keep one piece from nearly every period. "I'm not always the best judge of what to save," he admits. "I wish I'd kept some of my better-known works. I weep over that. There's a painting that I consider my best one—*Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western*, from 1963. It's owned by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond. If I had a wish list, that would be at the top. It embodies the esthetics of all my work."

Ruscha has kept a number of his drawings over the years. *Miracle*, from the early 1970s, a tiny pencil sketch of a church window with light streaming out, done on a 3-by-5-inch index card, is a favorite. "It's such an oddball drawing," says Ruscha. "It was a spontaneous sketch. You might say that it doesn't look like my work, and you might be right. But it strikes a special chord. It warms me."

Some artists, once their careers have taken off, buy back their art from collectors or dealers or from institutions. In a spectacular move in November 2003, Damien Hirst and his dealer, Jay Jopling, bought back about 12 works of art valued at an estimated $15 million from collector Charles Saatchi. On a more humble scale, Robert Ryman, 75, has reacquired several of his pieces over the years. He was even able to buy back the first painting he sold, from 1958. It sold for $80 at the staff-art show in New York's Museum of Modern Art's penthouse. At the time, Ryman was working as a guard at the museum, earning $40 a week. "It was bought by Gertrud Mellon, a friend of Dorothy Miller," says Ryman, referring to the museum's legendary curator. "I was so moved that someone wanted to buy the painting—and I know it sounds ridiculous now, but my rent was $35 a month, so $80 was a big boost."

Mellon kept the painting for more than 30 years before she brought it to the PaceWildenstein gallery in New York to inquire about its value. The gallery called Ryman to come look at the painting, which he hadn't seen since he sold it. Though gallery representatives won't confirm the value they placed on the painting at the time, Sotheby's auction records from 1991 estimate the value of a comparable painting at $80,000 to $100,000.

"I asked Gertrud Mellon if she would be willing to sell it to me," says Ryman, adding that at the time, he couldn't afford to pay what it was worth. Mellon offered it as a gift, but Ryman didn't consider it fair to accept. "I thought I should give her something in return," says Ryman. He suggested a set of prints, but Mellon refused. "So I asked if I could title the painting 'To Gertrud Mellon' in her honor, and she gave it to me," he says.

Alex Katz, 75, maintains a collection of what he considers his best work, particularly from the 1950s and '60s, that failed to sell in his first five shows. "Even when I got very well known, I wasn't selling a lot," says Katz. "By the time I started to sell, I had the brains to know that I should still keep 10 percent of the good pictures." Today the artist is selectively selling and donating to public collections some of these early works that he kept. *Black Dress* (1960), an iconic painting with multiple views of Katz's wife, Ada, wearing a basic black dress, and a 1959 portrait of choreographer Paul Taylor went to the German collector Udo Brandhorst. "*Paul Taylor* is the best of the flat-figure-on-ground paintings," says Katz. "I had lots of offers to sell, but I finally sold it to Brandhorst. One, he paid the price and didn't haggle at all—and two, because he's making a museum in Munich and I'll have two rooms there. If any public place wants a painting of mine, I don't have the right to keep it."

Alex Katz held on to a portrait of his son, *Vincent and Sunny*, 1967, for more than 30 years.

But selling an artwork, regardless of the economic gain, comes at a price. "When I sell a painting, I feel so poor," says Katz. "After I sold *Vincent and Sunny*," he adds, referring to a painting of his son as a young boy, "my wife started crying. It was painted in 1967, and I sold it last year. We had lived with it for years. Finally I had an offer to put it into a museum, and I thought, 'I've got to let it go.' But the money can't compare with the painting. I have very austere habits, and I don't want to waste the time spending the money. It doesn't mean anything. A really good painting to look at makes me feel good. When it goes away, there's a hole." ■

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