At Nasher, a collection and a gift

The Triangle and Durham, especially, are lucky to have this moment in time huge collections of contemporary art of the last 10 years in two important exhibitions; one at Duke's Nasher Museum of Art and the other at Hotel 21C. For this column, I will be visiting the art at the Nasher which includes painting, sculpture, drawing and multimedia objects. The works in the exhibition belong to Nancy A. Nasher and her husband, David J. Haemisegger, who are the daughter and son-in-law of Raymond and Patzy Nasher, the primary donors for Duke's art museum.

The exhibition of more than 30 large-scale works explores two distinct legacies: one of contemporary artists' innovative use of materials, the other of philanthropy and collecting. The artists are a diverse group. Six of the 35 are women and their countries of origin are England, Italy, India, Canada, Pakistan, Germany, Chile, China and the United States. The art is part of a personal collection of two people and represents their particular preferences and how they see art and the moment.

Some of the artists, like Damien Hurst, Alfredo Jaar, Kehinde Wiley, Rachel Whiteread and Kara Walker have national reputations; others are new to the viewers.

Will these artists be considered great 25, 50 or 100 years from now? It is hard to say, but their chances of making the art history surveys, which is the leading indicator of which artists have earned a lasting reputation, are considerably enhanced because important collectors own their works. In the case of Nasher and Haemisegger, they are part of a family which has funded major museums. In the case of Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson, the owners of the 21C chain, their hotels are museums and their collection, which numbers more than 1,400 individual objects, rotates regularly through their hotels.

Threaded through every object in the exhibition is an acknowledgement of its 20th century artistic ancestors, the abstract expressionists, pop artists and those others who embraced industrial materials, manufactured objects and other non-traditional materials. Californian Christian Marclay's "Actions: Flopppy Strump Spalooch Whoomph (No. 3)," owes much to the artistic past. He is known for molding sound with the visual. In this 2013 screenprint with acrylic, there is no audio but the style suggests it. The artist writes onomatopoetic words on his composition which jump across the green and orange splats of paint in comic book expressions suggesting audio and action. The loose, gestural paint style pays homage to abstract expressionism and the comic book expressions make ombusance to pop art.

One of the most ubiquitous of non-traditional materials is photographic science, like videos or digital images or photographs themselves; the inclusion of found objects like newspaper clippings or cast-off metal are a close second. Artists have been adding materials to their traditional paintings and sculpture since the first days of the 20th century. North Carolina Elliott Hundley's large collage "eyes that run like leaping fire" is the perfect example. From a distance, "eyes" exudes a painterly expressiveness, which dissolves on close inspection into clusters of tiny figures, magazine clippings and bits of fabric precariously held in place by pins. His story, told in 21st century materials, is the tragic Greek tale of Agave, mother of Pentheus, who accidentally kills her son. Today technology constantly intersects with art. India's Anish Kapoor's disc of polished stainless steel introduces the show. Positioned at the entrance, it reflects the large center space of the Nasher lobby upside down. As I walked toward the object I ducked; I thought my own reflection was going to hit me. I moved a bit closer and his mirror both attracted and swallowed me.

The American Kara Walker is represented by a drawing of a large sculpture, "A Subtlety or Marvelous Sugar Baby," that she created in 2014. With polystyrene foam and 30 tons of sugar Walker created a sculpture in a scheduled-for-demolition New York City Domino Sugar Factory. With no apologies, the sphinx is a hybrid of two racist stereotypes and the black female: She wears the kachash of the mythic demonic caretaker and is the overly sexualized black woman with prominent breasts and enormous buttocks. Overlaid on the object is the story of the production of sugar on the backs of black slaves.

Another American, Kehinde Wiley, paints young black women and men in today's casual fashions as figures from Old Master paintings and challenges established notions about black identity. "Naima and Her Daughters," 2013, is a Biblical story and a direct borrowing from the 19th century British artist George Dawe.

As the British artist Edmund de Waal's installation "breathturn it," 2013, is in the first gallery it seems to sum up the story of the collector. De Waal, who is a writer and a ceramist, works exclusively in shades of white, cream and black to make handcrafted installations of delicate porcelain dishware. In this one there are hundreds of vessels on the shelves which are symbolic of the human impulse to collect objects and fill empty spaces. It also suggests the emotions of collecting, desire, ownership and loss that accompany every collection.

People collect art for many reasons. Some collect only for investment and warehouse the objects until the price is right to sell. Others collect art because they want to surround themselves with beautiful objects and enjoy helping artists by buying their work. And then there are those who have a wherewithal to share their art, like the Nasher daughter and her husband, by creating exhibitions and ultimately placing some on museum walls. The Nasher parents have already given enough money to museums in Dallas and Durham. It is people like them who fill our museums and make our lives richer.

Contact Blue Greenberg at blues@blueblacksouth.net.