



FLATT

Made in America

Issue #4, 2013

Janella Monaghan / Gary Clark Jr. / Mickalene Thomas / Cyndi Lauper / KAWS / Joyce DiDonato / Mick Rock / Morgan Kibby



KELSEY BENNETT

THE NATIONAL ARTS CLUB

The venerable National Arts Club in Manhattan has been a secret sanctum for American artists and patrons for over 120 years. Most know about it through its landmark location on Gramercy Park and publicly offered exhibitions. But few have had the privilege to actually meander through the outrageously charming inner architecture. Myths of secret entrances and wild soires mesh with the reality of palatial artist studio apartments where iconic American painters such as the late Will Barnett and Everett Kinstler have lived and painted for the past 40 and 60 years respectively. There are infinite backstories that only a place like the NAC could foster whose illustrious members have included Mark Twain, Eleanor Roosevelt, Humphrey Bogart, Frank McCourt, Mary McCarthy, Alfred Stieglitz, Martin Scorsese, and Uma Thurman -just to name a few. One can only imagine the legends unfolding on any given evening with Brubeck at the piano, Bogart at the bar and Hepburn holding court. In the late nineteenth century, Charles de Kay, literary critic for the New York Times, put an agenda in place to woo major collectors away from buying foreign art and to promote America's own artists. De Kay believed that there was a need for a club uniting all of the arts. In March of 1898, de Kay called together a number of civic leaders and men prominent in the art world that supported the idea, elected the first officers and incorporated the Club in 1899. As you walk through the front door on 21st street, another era slowly unfolds beneath the amber glow of Tiffany lamps. Each step through the main salon reveals a new treasure reminiscent of the gilded age. Museum masterpieces of American art share the walls with black-walnut carved panels and satinwood carvings by Ellin and Kitsen. The turquoise ceiling tiles and the stained glass windows draw your eye to the dazzling vaulted glass dome, the work of Boston glazier Donald MacDonald. The NAC is on an upswing having withstood the controversy of its former president's behavior for the past two decades, a story that includes highly questionable finances, hoarding, and a cinematic play for power. I sat down with current president, Dianne Bernhard, to discuss her part in the miraculous transformation and reinstatement of the original mission of The National Arts Club. Dianne and I sit together in the newly refurbished, five star dining room of the NAC. The eclectic elegance is amplified

when seated between an extensive “Pug” dog figurine collection and priceless artworks of great historical importance. The pug collection was bequeathed by Sylvia Sidney, an Academy Award-nominated member and resident muse of Alfred Hitchcock. After her passing, Sylvia’s pug, Malcolm, remained a resident for several more years. Malcolm’s ashes remain among the memorabilia. Our older gentlemanly server, the kind of server that is as much a part of the club atmosphere as the fixtures themselves, suggests the finest of the day’s offerings while peddling his opinion of the new Whitney show. It takes quite a while to begin the interview as Dianne’s appearance has caused quite a stir and there is a line up of club members waiting to pay their compliments on her leadership.



CHRISTINA LESSA: Can you tell me how the transition has been going now that you've taken the helm at the NAC?

DIANNE BERNHARD: As most people know, there were some changes in the club and the natural thing for me to do as Vice President was to step up, and I was voted in. With regards to the, 'prior litigation', the club went through an 18 month struggle that was capped on September 21st 2012 with the former president being taken to task by the Attorney General's office. This is a 'closed chapter'. The Club was cleared of wrongdoing and we have moved on. It's all about the vision that the Founders of the Club set in the NAC Constitution, including their framework of 'how we are to govern ourselves'. The first order of business was to sort through the hoarded rooms in order to locate the records requested by the New York State Attorney General for their investigation. We then began rehabilitating our physical plant. This was a very necessary top-to-bottom renovation including cleaning, replacing dirty, torn carpeting and upholstery, organizing documents and putting everything in its place. We also of course had to establish order from a management perspective, including hiring a general manager and a controller, as well as setting guidelines for our committees and programming.

CHRISTINA LESSA: Before you became a resident and governor of The National Arts Club you were an active artist, and patron originally from Texas. Can you tell me a brief history of your life growing up in Texas as an artist during that time in history and what NYC's relationship to the arts meant then to you?

DIANNE BERNHARD: New York City has always been the nexus of American art and for a young girl from Texas it seemed very distant, unreachable, so far away... a dream away. But the big city for me that came first was Houston. So Houston was the first step on that path and I arrived there around the age of 18 and started studies at the University of Houston where I began painting on canvas. Later I started formal studies that included study at the Art League. As time went on I began traveling and I studied art abroad. I would go to Paris or Mexico or Central America and I would go to local galleries, seek out interesting artists and see if they taught privately. They were always happy to show an American their art so it was always an open door for me to the artists. I studied all of the old masters. The Spanish masters, those were my heroes. If there was any one single influence it was Sargent. His work was so alive and vibrant and you know traditional work just didn't have that kind of emotion, but his

did. I copied a lot of the masters, that's how we learned then. Well, it didn't take me long to realize that I was not a great painter, but I was a great teacher. I started teaching "paint along class" which in the 70's was unusual. I learned to teach the elementary basics but to a wide variety of people, and they loved it. I knew I wasn't a great artist, but I was a great teacher, and I learned from my students. Students will always teach the master if the master is open to new ideas. Eventually I moved to Connecticut and situated myself between Boston and New York as a teacher. I also traveled as a master teacher doing work shops around the country. So the love of art has been in my blood for so very long.

CHRISTINA LESSA: I'm curious about the club's transformation since the last regime, everyone knows it was a tumultuous take over from the old guard after 20 years of leadership. Aside from the drama of all of that, how are things different under your command?

DIANNE BERNHARD: The club was established by an art and literary critic from the New York Times for the American people to become aware of American artists as opposed to relying on European influences for their cultural references. That is what our goal is: to return the club to that vision. We want to return the club to the arts. We want to support new as well as established American artists. It did stray from the mission for a while but we are back roaring louder than ever. We may act also as a power broker between the American artist and the museums -somewhere in the middle, because the artist's goal is to somehow reach the museum level by the end of their career while the museum's goal is to find the best artist for their collection as a historical reference. With the rich history that we have, we can continue to look for that talent and foster it in all disciplines. Whether it's a musician or an artist, it's not only how do we get to Carnegie hall or a museum but also how do we get this information to the public on a highly visible level? How do we continue to make art the most exciting thing that there is? My goal is that I want everybody in NYC to wake up and say, "What's going on at the NAC today?" That's who we are. That's what our governing board wants. We are a national treasure and an historical landmark and we should be nothing less than that.

CHRISTINA LESSA: It's interesting to me that the establishment of this club came during a time that American artists were increasingly looking to their own nation for inspiration rather than Europe. I feel that now we seem to be doing that again, America is becoming a creative thought leader and Europe is

looking to us for inspiration. Do you feel that there is a zeitgeist happening?

DIANNE BERNHARD: I feel that history repeats itself and goes through cycles even though we try to manage or control the cycles. Sometimes there is just an element of wisdom within the universe and I think that we've turned a corner in the wisdom of the art world. This country now embraces contemporary artistry of all kinds. I think that it's taken America a while to catch up with European traditions. You know we just aren't really that old. But, we are on the rise and I think everyone is paying attention to what's going on in America now. We have some really incredible artists in this country and the NAC has had a tradition of highlighting the avant-garde and making history. I think that the artists that take chances, but with quality execution will be remembered. Like in the times of Rubens, a Rubenesque woman was a shock to see painted. Throughout history, new and different things are always shocking at first. 1904 marked the year that the National Arts Club mounted an historic exhibition of paintings by Arthur B. Davies, William Glackens, George Luks, Maurice Prendergast, John Sloan, and Robert Henri. We had the first exhibition of work by Alfred Stieglitz's Photo-Secession group in 1902. In 1903 and 1904, the club was caught up in controversy over shows featuring the work of Auguste Rodin, which drew the condemnation of the prudish critics.

CHRISTINA LESSA: NAC was also at the vanguard of politics from the start. Wasn't this the first private club to admit women with full privileges? You also embraced photography as a high art form long before other arts institutions caught on.

DIANNE BERNHARD: Yes.. 1898! In the very beginning we admitted women on a fair and equal basis. Eleanor Roosevelt was an early member and yes, Stieglitz was here as a member and we did promote his work around the same time that MOMA was looking at photography in a different light. There was always that stigma between what people consider real art and photography. I think that today those lines are gone. I think that because of photography being shown with high regards from decades ago and onward that that level of disrespect is a thing of the past now. We have so many incredible photography shows here.

CHRISTINA LESSA: Everyone is trying to bring in new patrons. What are your plans to attract new generations to the club and its mission?



DIANNE BERNHARD: We have a new vision, a new plan for the future. One of the new exhibits that we just had was an Andy Warhol show which many younger viewers were very excited about. We are reaching out to the Smithsonian to do a collaborative effort with our collection and their collection and again, promote this to a multi generational crowd who may be seeing both collections for the first time. We are going to start touring our collection. This is very exciting. As you can see our walls our covered in the finest representations of American history and people need to understand what that means. We have one of the largest bodies of early American 20th century art and people need to know that this exists, and is accessible. We have also begun to take a step forward and embrace all styles of art. I think the most extraordinary thing right now is performance art and I think of artists like Will Cotton and the expression and presentation of that is so hard for traditional minded people to grasp. There are others too, Marina Abromovic, Ryan Macnamara, so many, but then we have traditional minded people that frequent the opera and I see performance art like opera combined with some Broadway and so much incredible talent emerging. When we look at these decades old paintings on the wall here we have to remember that at one point this was current and there could have been an entire performance based on some of them. Traditionalists often have trouble getting their arms around that. But change is coming and that's the kind of thing that the NAC is here for, to educate the American public on what's happening next. We should be on the cutting edge of cultural energy.

CHRISTINA LESSA: The membership of the National Arts Club has included three Presidents of the United States: Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Dwight Eisenhower. The list of notable members goes on: Herman Melville, Henry James, Stanford White, Mary McCarthy, and Humphrey Bogart. If these walls could talk...

DIANNE BERNHARD: There are definitely a lot of ghosts here, a lot. This building was originally home to Samuel Tilden, who was the Governor of NY at the turn of the century. Tilden was an eminent lawyer and reformer and at about the time the remodeling of his home, this building, was being completed he was the Democratic Party's nominee for president. He won the popular vote but lost the election in the Electoral College by one vote, therefore, losing the presidency by a hair. It was Florida (again!) that held that vote! He was a very interesting man. He was a bachelor. We understand that there are hidden

doors that his lady friends could have used to exit through secretly before his other guests would arrive. There are a lot of stories around him. He was a bookworm! He actually provided the seed money for the NY Public Library. There are a lot of colorful tales associated with this avid reader and arts patron!

CHRISTINA LESSA: The general public is really unaware of the NAC. I did not find out about it until I lived in Manhattan and attended Cooper Union, I had never heard of it before that. Will you now begin to spread the word online about the club, or will you maintain the mystique and old school word of mouth campaign? I ask this specifically because of the many awards and scholarships that you offer. In this day and age what you offer, and in such a broad scope of disciplines is almost unparalleled.

DIANNE BERNHARD: Well, as I said before, it is a democracy here and changing traditions can be sensitive. In addition to that we are a private club, open for membership and at a very reasonable cost. We have to maintain our goal to foster the arts in the public realm while providing a sense of privacy for our members. At this point we have no choice to but to go into social media. But, believe it or not, we have only had Internet access in the Building for about 6 months! We are undergoing a reconstruction right now. We will embrace social media. We are revamping our website that will be available to the public. It's all part of our plan. **CHRISTINA LESSA:** In many ways you have now assumed the role of curator here at the club. You are surrounded by 19th century American masterworks, yet you are embroiled in the consideration of current works. What is the philosophy behind this type of curating for you? Is it fair to say that you have a deeper knowledge of the history behind this genre of works than of contemporary works? Do you think that this colors your curating?

DIANNE BERNHARD: Firstly, I am not the curator of arts here. We have a curator on staff and James Cavello is our new exhibition chair. However, I do consider myself the curator of culture here, in that we need to keep current. When the club started, the work that you see on these walls was traditional but in 1898, it was considered contemporary. So it wasn't until after WWII that typical Americans really became aware of contemporary works and abstract expressionism, even though it had been going on in Europe for a while. Then came the Pollock era here, so all of a sudden we had this thing called Contemporary art. So I look at all art and the execution of the art and that's what keeps me balanced. It may not be my style or taste, but I can see the execution of a great piece of art if it's there. If the quality is not there in

the execution then the work is void to me. It's not just aesthetics in the interpretation of beauty that matters; it has to be of high quality. It took me many years to really understand Jackson Pollock's work. But I remember the very day that I walked in to the Yale university Gallery and there was a Pollock right in the center of the room. I walked in and I saw it and a I started crying! I understood the painting. It was as if the soul and spirit of the painting embraced me. I think that if the soul of the painting isn't obvious, it probably doesn't have one. As a lover of great art, I look for the soul. It's not always about the prizewinners. It's not always about the famous. There are many, many, artists out there that have gone unrecognized and many that don't necessarily deserve the attention that they do get. But that's where marketing and the new technology have given many a promotional edge.

CHRISTINA LESSA: There are more young artists now than ever before because of the boom in creative e-commerce and the possibility of global visibility through self-promotion. How are you planning to reach this audience who aren't tuned into the club and may view it as an older establishment and out of touch?

DIANNE BERNHARD: The first thing that I want to say is that there is always going to be a venue, no matter where or how, that people will use to get together to talk about things that are meaningful to them face to face. Tools of communication will never replace one-on-one or the first hand experience of the viewer with the tangible. There will always be a salon. There is an even greater need for it now as people are becoming numb and we are using all of these tools. I mean when the telephone came, people didn't stop visiting each other. To that end we have been in the process of revamping our website and we have many tech experts in our young members committee. We now have an art and technology committee. We are doing films with art exhibits, combining more disciplines together so that we can continue to educate our members and represent the art of our time.

CHRISTINA LESSA: The NAC's mission is an endowed one, and in this period of economically challenged patronage that is an amazing position to be in. The club offers a multitude of grants and awards. Can you tell me about some of those?

DIANNE BERNHARD: We are very excited to announce that we will be starting a plan for artists in residence. We are going to dedicate one of our beautiful front spaces with great light to a chosen artist.

It will be in different processes, emerging and established. All of our board members and committee members are volunteers that come to us with a great passion to make a change in the world. In the first year and a half the board has put together a process that will enable artists to be in residence here 6 months a year: living here, working here in their own studio and enjoying all of the privileges of a membership for a year. We will bring master artists in to work with them and it's going to be fantastic. The artists will be selected through committee nominations, researched and voted on. We will also be starting up our student exhibitions again. All of the deans from University level art schools will be encouraged to send in their best students work. We will also continue our esteemed awards programs, but with more visibility to the public. It is our programs that define our Club. Today, the Club has 14 committees that enable a dynamic variety of programming every day. These include exhibitions, recitals, lectures and Medal of Honor award dinners, such as the event where we honored composer Byron Janis last month, or this month's event honoring fashion and costume designer Patricia Field. We have a strong Board of Governors and a strong team of advisors. All of them are professionals in their fields and enjoy great satisfaction in seeing the NAC thrive in its role to support the arts community. It takes a village to make the NAC the wonderful cultural institution it is. Together, we work closely every day with these advisors, our strong management team, our exemplary, dedicated staff, and of course the members. As a 501(c)(3), we are bound to our mission (which is a very important one) to support and promote the arts. Specifically we play an educational role, to educate the American public in the arts, and we keep this in the forefront of our minds with everything we do here.



CHRISTINA LESSA: Is there a cultural or historical moment that has defined you?

DIANNE BERNHARD: I'm a girl from Texas who grew up with the Alamo. Texas history is all about 'Remember the Alamo' – it takes courage and true grit to stand up for your principals and defend the honor.
MR. EVERETT RAYMOND KINSTLER



A few days after Dianne and I met, I was privileged enough to get a glimpse into the studio and history of famed American portraitist and sixty year National Arts Club member and resident, Everett Raymond Kinstler. As one of the 'Golden age' era of comic book artists, his illustrations for magazines, including The Shadow and Doc Savage, have influenced the pop art school. His portrait commissions include seven presidents and countless American personalities and artists. The National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., has acquired 75 of his original works for its permanent collection. His work is also represented in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Brooklyn museum and many others. In 1999, Kinstler received the Copley Medal from the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, its highest honor.

CHRISTINA LESSA: How did you come into your residency at The National Arts Club?

EVERETT RAYMOND KINSTLER: The National Arts Club has provided me with the atmosphere to explore, develop and pursue my creative ambitions. I have lived and worked at the NAC for over 60 years! I left high school before my 16th birthday to draw comic books, during the early 1940's. At that time, I enrolled in the Art Students League in NYC. I studied with Frank Vincent DuMond, a fine illustrator, muralist and teacher. His influence on American painting was extraordinary, O'Keefe, Marin, Rockwell all studied with him. He would often say, "I won't teach you how to paint, but to see and observe". Mr. DuMond lived in the NAC and found me a modest studio at the club when I was about 22 years old. Around the same time that I moved into the club, I sought out the teaching of the great American illustrator, James Montgomery Flagg. Flagg is perhaps best known for his finger wagging Uncle Sam in the I WANT YOU FOR THE U.S. ARMY, the iconic WW1 recruiting poster. When I was 17 years old, I went to Flagg's building to show him my work. He had a huge reputation and wasn't very friendly, but after hearing the plea of a young artist telling him he was about to be drafted (I actually wasn't), he let me come up to see him and I'll never forget it. He was a big guy with heavy eyebrows wearing a blue shirt and red suspenders. He looked just like his Uncle Sam poster. After studying my work for a while, he looked up and said "Son, you're doomed to be an artist." He was 50 years my senior and although he had achieved great success in his time, he knew what a tough business art could be. After that, we visited frequently and when he died, I delivered the eulogy at his funeral.

CHRISTINA LESSA: How did you transition to being a portrait painter?

EVERETT RAYMOND KINSTLER: When I was in my late twenties, magazines that were important outlets for illustrators began to fold, and it was getting more difficult to find work. I had always painted people in my illustrations so I decided to bring my portrait samples to a gallery in NY honestly called, "Portraits. Inc." My first commission came from Forrest E. Mars of the famous Mars Candy company family. Since then I have painted over 2000 portraits. As I moved from drawing comics to working on magazine illustrations and book covers and began to focus on portraiture, I was connecting with a wide cross section of the American culture. I was involved with my fellow artists through exhibitions and all the leafing art societies. Throughout my career I have been lucky enough to paint people who have made a cultural difference, like the astronauts, Scott Carpenter and Alan Shepard, like the president, Bill Clinton and actress, Katherine Hepburn just to name a few.

CHRISTINA LESSA: What has life been like here at the NAC?

EVERETT RAYMOND KINSTLER: Living and working at the NAC brought me into contact with countless artists and creative people who influenced my life and career. Ayn Rand, Salvador Dali, Leonard Bernstein, Will Barnet, and so many others too numerous to mention – I could give you a few stories though... Dave Brubeck and I became close friends through the club. I painted while he played the piano. He was interested in finding similarities between his playing at the keyboard, and my painting. I mentioned how I thought of my palette as a 'keyboard' with light and dark colors, much as he used low and high notes, I told him I basically selected my colors from the middle tones, to which he replied, "That's exactly how I play the piano."



Dave was a rare talent, a warm, sensitive and perennially youthful creative person. On one of her many visits to the NAC to pose, Katharine Hepburn literally drove me nuts, she picked apart several portraits I had painted of her: questioning, recommending so many endless changes that I told her I simply couldn't continue with our posing sessions. She looked at me coolly saying, "You have a problem, you talk too much. Why don't you get back to your painting!" "I had not seen Kate Hepburn for almost two years. One day she telephoned me asking me to call her the, "next morning at 9 am." Following her instructions, the next day I telephoned Ms. Hepburn at EXACTLY 9am. She answered saying, "What do you want?" I explained she had requested I call at precisely 9am, she asked, "about what?" When I told her I didn't have a clue she said, "Well, neither do I." and she hung up! The NAC studio building built in 1906 has only one elevator. The afternoon President Ronald Reagan arrived to pose the elevator broke down. The president walked up eleven floors to my studio! America's first man in space Alan Shepard, posed in his authentic astronaut suit in my studio. James Cagney performed his Academy Award winning "Yankee Doodle Dandy" tap dance during his posing sessions. I have painted Tony Bennett's portraits for many years, and we have become the closest of friends. The best way to appreciate Tony Bennett's musical artistry is to watch him during a recording session. Once after what I thought was a fabulous recording with a 100-piece orchestra everyone present burst into spontaneous applause. Tony asked to try the song again. When he was finished I inquired if he had heard something he didn't like in the previous recording. He replied, he sang it again because, "there was something I didn't hear". Always the perfectionist, Tony's talent continues to deepen and growa unique gifted, totally honest talent.

CHRISTINA LESSA: After all that you have experienced as an artist, what piece of advice would you give to the next generation of creatives?

EVERETT RAYMOND KINSTLER: Ah, where to begin...I do believe in the creative spirit and I value imagination. These fuel the passion and the skills necessary to communicate. Creative work must have eyes for new images, ears for new sounds, always stay on the lookout for what's coming next, but remember, it is vital for an artist to never lose sight of the past. Today's artists have new methods, technologies, and many distractions and seductions. There is no substitution for working from life and

nature !



