

Arts Philanthropist, Collector Randy Shull Turns Spotlight On Own Art—Depression Included

Randy Shull is giving a personal tour of his recent artworks. They're displayed around an expansive Biltmore Village warehouse gallery most artists would covet. What's remarkable, at least for an artist in an increasingly gentrified Asheville, is this gallery belongs to Shull. He's preparing these pieces for an exhibition at a much smaller space—the [Tracey Morgan Gallery](#) in South Slope. Opening reception is July 19 and the show runs through August 24.

“There’s this need to continue to work because I do have it so good,” Shull said.



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Shull has it so good, as he phrased it, because of two things: In the 1980s and '90s, New York galleries consistently sold his custom furniture. Also, after moving to Asheville, Shull turned much of that income into some well-timed real estate investments and renovations.

Today, Shull and his wife, Hedy Fischer, are among Asheville’s top arts philanthropists and art collectors. Shull and Fischer opened the [Pink Dog Creative](#) studios and gallery, which thrives in the River Arts District as an outlet for local artists, and they’re high-dollar donors to the Media Arts Project and Black Mountain College and Art Center. For many years now, Shull has indulged his artistic impulses without financial concerns “Right now, I’m just making work I want to make,” he said. “If that takes hold, I’m very pleased. If it doesn’t, I’ll continue to work.”

The work in Shull’s studio falls along two distinct tracts. One is a series of collages in which Shull has enlarged black-and-white photographs of his eye and embedded them into colorful paintings. These are representations of Shull’s self-reflections. The other is paintings coupled with simple wooden benches—some functionally sized, some miniatures. These connect to Shull’s roots in the art furniture scene. “There were galleries in New York and Chicago and Los Angeles that were selling art furniture—furniture made by artists who were making highly creative, highly functional, highly sought-after furniture—and I

became part of that movement,” Shull said. “My vocabulary was about introducing color into furniture in ways contemporary artists weren’t doing.”

Over time, Shull felt constrained by his success. “I felt that in order to be successful, I needed to make the same work over and over and have a definable aesthetic that the gallery could market,” he said. “I really wanted to play more in the work and make more discoveries in the work.” That happened for him in the early ‘90s after moving to Asheville. Shull paid just \$85 per month for his first studio—all 2,000 square feet of it—and he later used money from his New York gallery sales to buy his first home, in Kenilworth. He continued buying, renovating and renting out homes before Asheville’s housing market tightened.

Dividing his time between real estate and his own art making freed him of satisfying an art market. Naturally, his art evolved. “It could have been a sex change, it was that dramatic,” he said. “(It was) mostly lots of panic attacks and anxiety about transitioning from a furniture maker to a painter. I really didn’t know a whole lot about the history of making paintings, not really understanding where I fit into that.”



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Shull delved into abstract painting and eventually, perhaps inevitably, married his artistries, placing benches either as miniature fixtures on top of his paintings or as an actual-sized accompaniment to them. “It’s probably an insecurity, an anchor for me, to this history that I have to my own history,” he said. “My intent is really to use the furniture as a springboard to the conversation.”

Then there are his recent collage paintings, incorporating photos of his own eyes into paintings of trees and other images. Shull says they serve as metaphors of self-examination amid his bouts of depression. “Some of the things I grapple with are not necessarily fitting into social norms,” he said. “Maybe this helps me articulate some of these thoughts. It’s still complicated, but my bouts of depression are fewer and farther in between.” For all his largesse, Shull has no intention of letting go of his own massive, enviable studio anytime soon. “My goal right now is to kind of be this undiscovered painter,” he said, “who has this warehouse full of paintings when he’s 80, that have their own idiosyncratic vision of the world.”

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