

THE PASSION OF THE MENDELSON

By John Lamberson

If you don't know him, you can only speculate. You might know of his gallery or of his reputation, both established over 20 years of setting precedents in the Pittsburgh art world.

When Steve Mendelson got off the plane in France a few weeks ago, what was he doing? Surely his presence was immediately noticed, like when he enters the room at one of the Pittsburgh black-tie fundraisers he frequents. His athletic, 6' 4" frame was certainly complimented by a sharp outfit, probably with shades covering his handsomely intense eyes. A seasoned traveler, he most certainly ventured out of the baggage claim with a worldly confidence and an alluring smile.



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Previous write-ups have pointed out that he's been all over the world in exotic locations and has lived in many of them. He effortlessly waived down a Parisian taxicab, on his way to one of the Art Mecca's more posh districts for some top notch cuisine Francais and Bordeaux. Maybe he was meeting some high-profile artist or an old friend from his multi-year stint of living there. Surely his accommodations couldn't have been too shabby. Many know he lives in his gorgeous Ellsworth Avenue gallery in Shadyside, surrounded by fabulous works of art from a variety of celebrated authors. You may have seen him enjoying himself, a would-be buyer, and a glass of fine wine at one of his gallery's well-attended & attention-grabbing openings. Surely he had some ritzy party or art show to attend in Paris. Whatever he was doing, Pittsburgh's most talked-about gallery owner was just living his extravagant lifestyle. He was doing what he does for a living: buying and selling art, right?

Not so fast. Although his lifestyle might seem enviable by many observers' standards, the rewards are not measurable on a financial scale.

"People think I'm spending all this money, that I live this incredible lifestyle. And I do. But I do it on a shoestring. I lived in Paris for years, passing a hat around as a street clown, a juggler, living on what was in the hat," says Mendelson.

Despite such modest beginnings, outrageous claims have followed the evolution of his success. Many have struggled to figure out how he has amassed a collection of great works.



He has endured, and denied, a variety of accusations.

"People thought I sold drugs (I didn't), or they thought I inherited all this money from my father. They speculate. When my father, who was a dentist in McKeesport, died of cancer at 57, I was left with nothing except memories of a kind-hearted, gentle man," says Mendelson.

He is quick to point out that his gallery started as a collection of his own art to sell and works lent to him by friends. "It's not like collecting art was a decision or an investment. I was an artist myself. My friends were artists. It wasn't a thought process, it just happened."

This lack of understanding in regards to his beginnings has also led to misconceptions about his current motivations. "The biggest misunderstanding about me is that people think I'm self-serving a traveling salesman, that I'm doing this for the money," he explains. "The people that know me know the proof is upstairs. You see that I live art, that I support it." Walk around his living quarters above the main gallery space. It is unclear where the gallery ends, and where his bedroom, his living room, or even his bathroom begins.

A glimpse into his early years further backs up his humble claims. He has made some choices over the years that most people might never understand. One of these choices was dropping out of college for an 8 month spiritual journey through India, where he "owned basically nothing but a loin cloth and a brass bowl." Turning his back on a more familiar

and material lifestyle, Mendelson began his journey for personal clarity. Looking for "answers and the truth," he sought the venerated Guru Neem Karaly Baba. He soon decided that learning from somebody else was not going to do it. Realizing he had to find the answers for himself, he left the Baba to become a holy man on his own. "I asked him for his blanket and his blessing and he sent me on my way."

While in the Western state of Gujarat, he joined a camp of holy men called Naga Babas. Under a tree in the desolate landscape, Mendelson stopped to meditate on his current state of affairs. Suddenly, a number of locals began bringing him babies to be blessed, kissing his feet, and making offerings. One family even brought a blind girl to be healed. At a young age, people had begun to be moved by his authentic spirituality. He learned the true responsibility of his position. In the end he learned that giving could be as rewarding as receiving.

After eventually returning to finish his art history degree at the University of Michigan, he again left the U.S. for India. When his plane stopped in Rome to re-fuel, spontaneously moved him to grab his bags and get off. Following a 2 month stint in the Italian capital, where acquaintance John Paul Getty had just disappeared in an extremely publicized kidnapping, he took off for Eastern Europe before ending up in Paris for a more extended stay. While making a living as a street performer, photographer, and a darkroom technician for Sipa Press, people began to understand his passion.



Tear sheets from L'Uomo Vogue

People really took notice when he was arrested while juggling on Les Champs-Elysee. After someone filmed the incident, one of Europe's foremost fashion & lifestyle magazines, L'Uomo Vogue, wrote a feature on the young performer. The year was 1976, and he had also landed a job as animateur at Club Med in Martinique. Along the way he befriended a number of talented and celebrated artists like Swiss artist Not Vital, whose works he still cherishes on his Shadyside gallery walls. His travels and relationships along the way are what gave life to his collection.

"I started with nothing. I was an artist myself. I've befriended a lot of artists who had absolutely nothing. Vik Muniz, who now is in every museum in the world, came here and did a show" recalls Mendelson. At a time when Muniz had "only \$100 bucks in his pocket," he made sure he, his wife, and their new baby stayed with him during the show. "We had a great time. And we are still friends to this day because I gave him a chance to show in Pittsburgh. That was a big deal for him." Not Vital, Emil Lukus, & Burton Morris are other artists now with international reputations that he once gave a chance to show work early on in their careers.

In some cases, the works that he acquired have increased many-fold in monetary value, sometimes as much as 10-20 times. Other noteworthy artists he collected early on include Louise Bourgeois, Keith Haring, and Robert Rauschenberg. "People could have bought all of these things and they didn't. But I bought them. Because I believed in these artists and I felt that they should be supported."

He isn't ashamed to admit that he has turned profits from his collection. But the margins are not his primary motivation. "I own pieces of art that I like and that I might or might not sell," he says. Responding to questions raised in regard to the monetary merits of buying art, Mendelson brings to light an invisible person in the gallery-to-your-wall process: the artist. He analogizes the art world to a big fish-little fish food chain. "The little fish have to eat too," he quips. "Without them there would be no big fish."

"I've made good investments in art," he admits. "But that's not why people should support an art gallery. It should be to support local artists. My biggest frustration is not being able to sell enough art to help local artists like Ben Mathews and many others to make a living. I feel that it's my responsibility to see that these artists that are good, that just happen to be living and working in Pittsburgh, are supported. Every famous artist in the world was local somewhere, weren't they? And when a community refuses to see that truth, they suffer from being provincial."

A look at Max Huggler, one of Mendelson's early mentor's, reveals some of the influences that manifest themselves today in his approach to collecting. The two met through a mutual friend, artist Not Vital, on Huggler's 80th birthday. The praised art collector & former director of the Kunsthalle Museum in Switzerland encouraged him to travel together. "He said, 'Let's look at art.'" Over a ten year relationship, they traveled to many destinations to do just that, several times per year. They "looked at whatever there was to see" in places like Spain, Greece, Italy, England, Syria, Jordan, Czechoslovakia, and all over the United States. In their discussions, Huggler would combine his weathered, academic view together with Mendelson's more emotional take on the works they examined. "It was a fabulous education for me. I knew what I knew about art, and he knew what he knew. In the end I opened his eyes to some things, and he opened my eyes to other things." When Huggler passed away in 1995, he left most of his collection to his Bern museum and set up the Paul Klee Foundation. "This was



Sculptures in background by Louise Bourgeois (left of Mendelson), and Man Ray (right).

a guy who really loved art. He never bought anything for personal gain. It was never about speculation, even when it was Picasso, Mondrian, or Kurt Schwitters. It was about buying things because he respected them, and it was about supporting the artist."

What he says about Huggler sounds close to things he's said himself. "I don't buy art to sell it. I buy it because it speaks to me. You can help the artist and you can help the art community when you buy art." When the masses dress up to attend an opening, many forget that there is an artist involved whose ability to create more works and ability to earn a living is dependant on somebody buying something. Everyone seems to think that everyone else will pick up the ball. Openings in the past have failed to sell even one piece despite hundreds of attendees.

Even though he would like to have seen more development in Pittsburgh's art-buying community than he has over two decades, he does recognize a number of significant successes. "By buying this building at the right time & the right price, by supporting the artists I've supported, by taking the chances within the lifestyle I've lived, I've succeeded," he explains. He was able to purchase the abandoned massage parlor, formerly owned by the notorious Dante 'Tex' Gill, for only \$32,000 at an IRS sale. "It was another

place an artist could show. By seeing me here, doing what I'm doing, I think some other galleries believed they could do something. I think in those ways I've been positive for the art community here."

"When people come in to my gallery, I expect them to jump in with both feet. I want people to collect. People have to realize that there are artists involved. I think art is a serious business. Selling art is a serious business. Just like creating art is a serious business," proclaims Mendelson.

"Some people think I complain too much, and maybe I do, but I really cherish the trust that a large number of art collectors have given me over the years. Without them I'm just a madman in the desert, doing nothing for anyone"

Maybe spirituality is the common theme here. From his spiritual quests in India 33 years ago, to his spiritual fusion of art, its creators, and his gallery, Mendelson is genuine in the direction of his path. He has become Pittsburgh's spokesman for art. "I've tried to gather a flock of followers. I don't want to sound like a holy man or something, but this is what I've tried to do. I've tried to set up a temple for art, and a place where ideas can be exchanged. And I think I have made a difference. Artists are prophets too, and they need to be heard." The Mendelson Gallery, 5874 Ellsworth Avenue, 412.361.8664 **TPM**