



Milly Paris at her home in Strathmore Park, Wellington.

A COLLECTOR'S TALE

Megan Nicol Reed meets an art lover having to bid her remarkable "friends" goodbye.

It doesn't have a red sticker. Those are the keepers. It doesn't even have a green sticker. Those are the ones she is yet to decide on. No, it has a yellow sticker. To be sold.

Of the many artworks Les and Milly Paris bought over the course of their marriage (500 apparently, although she has "never ever physically counted"), it is the only one they ever disagreed on. He took her to a gallery to see it. She tried to hide her dislike. He was intractable. "He walks up to it and he said, 'I want it. I like it. I'm going to have it. It's my birthday and I'm going to buy myself a present.'"

He said it would grow on her. It didn't. It hasn't.

He died suddenly a week later. That was 11 ½ years ago. Now Milly is packing up. Selling up. Moving to Sydney. Taking half the art with her. The rest of their remarkable collection (with a minimum expected return of \$3.6 million) goes under the hammer in 10 days' time at Auckland's Art + Object. In the line-up will be Les' final purchase.

"I've thought about it a lot, and I've talked to my husband, and I've said, 'Les, it has not grown on me.

And I'm sorry, where I'm going, I don't really want to give it wall space.'"

She shows me the work. I don't recognise it. Who's it by? She won't say. Says she doesn't want to hurt the artist's feelings. It's spiky. Confronting and hard-edged. Milly is 77. A small woman, in a nice blouse and sensible slacks, hair specially set for today's photoshoot. The work is not, presumably, to an old lady's taste. What does she like? Oh, Ralph Hotere would be her favourite, she says airily, pointing to



a particularly dark and austere work in the corner of her gallery. "Abstract works, contemporary and modern works, I find that they give you more, much more than a beautiful scene that's so pristinely presented and painted. That's how it is for ever, it never changes. Whereas an abstract work, every day it says something different to you. I like paintings that make you think. I don't like to look at something and that's all I can see in it. I can see its beauty, yes, but it doesn't tell you anything."

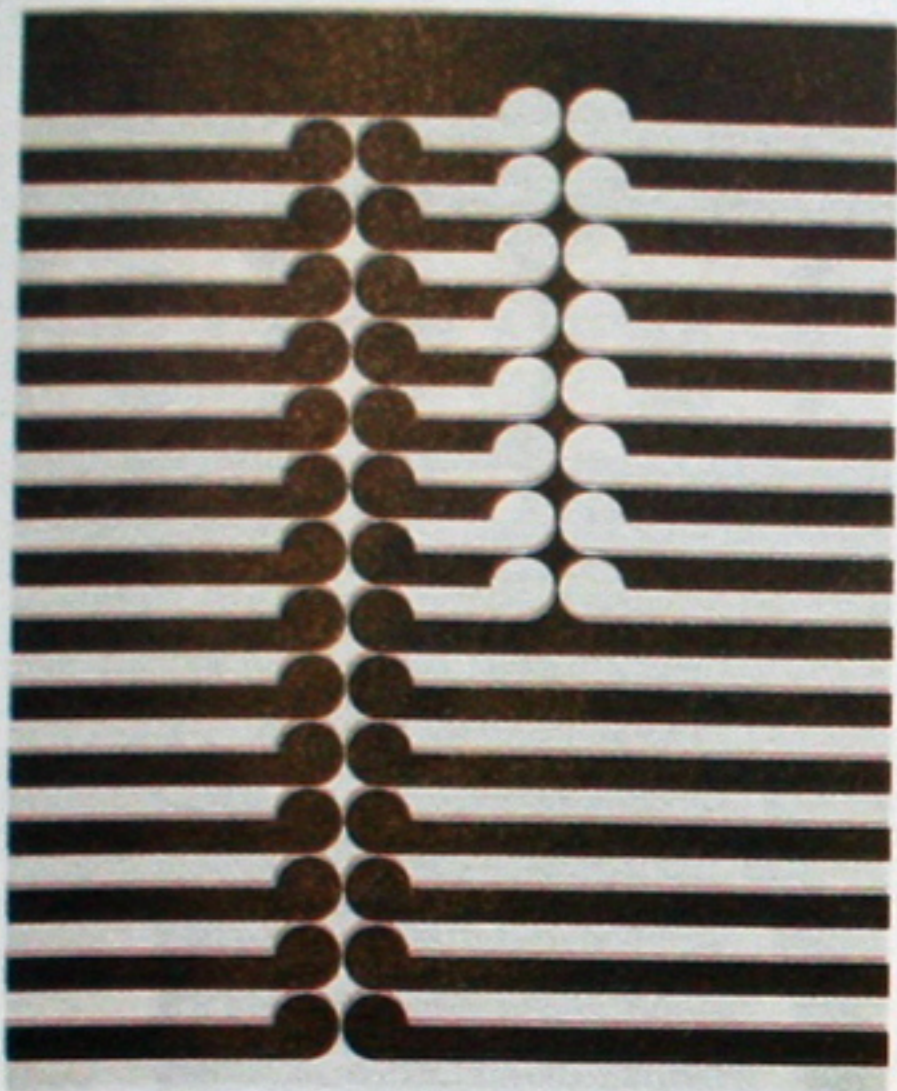
Back up a minute. Gallery? This is an ordinary, unassuming house; a bungalow the colour of the pinky, fleshy part of a mushroom. A short drive from Wellington Airport, it has no discerning features, apart from the fact it has been lifted. Most people raise their house to gain space, a rumpus room perhaps, a two-car

garage with internal access. The Parises got the garage, they even got a dumb waiter. They also got a large and light space with alabaster walls and salmon carpet in which to house their vast art collection.

Even if you know a gallery hung with work to rival our leading museums lies behind this suburban facade, at first sight it still takes your breath away. On one wall there is a group of black and white photographs – Peter Peryer, Julian Dashper, Theo Schoon. There are large abstract paintings by Milan Mrkusich (Les' favourite), Philip Clairmont and Allen Maddox. A Colin McCahon landscape. A Don Driver canvas and rope construction. There are sculptures on plinths, displayed in cabinets. Several little people made from bone by Linde Ivimey. ("I was very taken with them because when you look at a lot of art, I won't say you become immune to it, but it

just sort of washes over you, and when something comes along and goes WHOMP!, just like that, it's very special.")

They built this gallery – in which over the years they've held 21st, graduation and engagement parties for their son and daughter, and where, when he was alive, Les would come to look at the paintings and listen to classical music until Milly stamped on the floor to call him for dinner – because they had quite simply outgrown their house. "The paintings were stacked in front of the heater in the summertime and in front of the bay window in the wintertime and our armchairs were getting moved closer and closer to the TV and I just felt claustrophobic, because my arm wasn't long enough even to lift the blinds up and down. Les had to do that when he left



From left: Gordon Walters, *Karakia 2*; Michael Illingworth, *As Adam and Eve*; Michael Smither, *The Family in the Van*. Below: Les and Milly Paris.



in the morning or came home in the afternoon.”

Almost more surprising, though, than the gallery itself, is what lies upstairs, where the art that fills every single possible inch of wall space is juxtaposed against the most domestic of settings. The living room has a TV in one corner, a faded and fringed settee, a functional but ugly lamp (“I said to Les, ‘What are you going to put that in my front room for?’ He said, ‘Oh, it’s practical. You don’t need to spend a lot of money,’ he said to me.”) The large picture window is framed by a set of grand drapes.

But hang on, those aren’t folds of fabric; they’re the ripples of corrugated iron. “Jeff [Thomson] came here one day to have a look at the art with some friends and I said to him, ‘You know, Jeff, how about, if we’ve got time, I want to take you upstairs and ask you

something.’ So while Les was busy with the people downstairs, we just slipped away and I showed him the space, and I said, ‘Jeff, do you think you can make me a sculpture in the form of curtains?’ And he said, ‘Oh yes.’ And he said, ‘How do you want them?’ And I said, ‘Not like I’ve got them now. I want them with a bit of shape. I want them with a pelmet.’”

Milly is moving to Sydney to be near her son Zalman, who lives there with his wife and three children. A few years ago she had a bad fall, developed pneumonia and went into a diabetic coma. Both her children (her daughter, Ilana Porat, lives in Auckland) have spent the past few years urging her to move. She is only considering apartments with a window big enough to hang her Thomson curtains. “I didn’t want to leave them behind. They’re too beautiful.”

Milly’s attachment to the art goes beyond that of most people’s relationship to the inanimate. “Saying goodbye to so many at once will be very hard. Each one has a story. A beautiful story. A couple of weeks ago when I had to choose which ones would be coming with me and which ones would be going, it was terribly difficult. Every time I thought about it the tears would come. I said to my children, ‘I don’t know why I feel like this.’ They are a material possession but they’ve come to mean so much more than that. They’ve become friends. You go away and you come back and they leap off the wall and welcome you home.”

Neither Milly nor Les grew up around art (although she says her mother had impeccable taste and kept “a beautiful home”). They were given two paintings as wedding presents, and from those humble beginnings their love for New Zealand art grew. As a young lawyer, waiting for his case to be called, Les would duck in to the auction house, next door to the court, and pick up little works by artists like H W Kirkwood and Nugent Welch on the cheap. In 1963, they made their first significant purchase, a Peter McIntyre portrait, *Maori Boy*, bought before their house was even properly furnished. As Les’ practice grew, so did their collection. They became regular clients of Wellington dealer Peter McLeavey and made an annual trip to Auckland, sacrificing the usual trappings of middle-class life – travel (Les, terrified of flying, never left New Zealand), a flash house, a showy car – to buy more art. They funded the lifting of their house by selling off every work they owned predating 1950.

The Art + Object auction catalogue includes detailed provenance notes (“work first sighted at Dashper exhibition at Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North, 1994 and haunted me ever since”; “purchased from Brooker Gallery... first viewing, had no intention of buying anything, but overwhelmed by beauty of the work; “acquired... for two bottles of wine in July 1981”; “purchased from Barry Lett Gallery in April 1978.

“Les and I never bought the art for investment... just to take things off and sell them has never been a reason to buy them in the first place.”

Option not exercised by Auckland City Gallery”).

Choosing what stays, what goes, has been an emotional process and now, as it draws to an end, Milly is terribly tired. This interview and the televised one to follow, undertaken in July, the week before the packers come in, are almost too much for her. “I didn’t really get very much sleep last night. I had such an exhausting day yesterday. And then my son rang in the afternoon and he said to me, ‘Go to bed. You’re far too tired.’ And I said to him, ‘Yes, dear.’ I find that’s the easiest thing to say. And then I thought, ‘I must go into the kitchen and make my soup.’ So that’s what I did.”

Zalman rings during this interview to check how she is coping and she calls him “darling” and “pet”. Milly is warm, informed and full of apologies, fearing she is not as coherent as she would like to be. Faint after a marathon photoshoot, she suggests we break for lunch and brings out that soup (a delicious, orange, chunky stew of root vegetables) along with good bread and cheese, and homemade fruitcake. She requests I turn the tape recorder off while we eat and I feel awfully uncivilised not to have thought of that myself.

We talk about her family. Her parents came to

New Zealand from Europe as Jewish refugees after WWI. She has “three beautiful brothers”, one of whom, Martin Chait, started the famed Dixon Street Deli (according to its website, it introduced New Zealand to bagels). Milly and Les grew up in the same community. Their mothers knew each other. She was working as a secretary when they started going out.

There are no baby photos, no pictorial records of a graduation or anniversary dinner. (“Les was not keen on photos. He didn’t want to hang photos, not even of our children. Not even wedding photos.”) Instead, there is a stark black and white shot of the couple by Peter Peryer, various family portraits taken by Adrienne Martyn and a painting of the four of them by Toss Wollaston.

Milly is astounded by just how many photos the photographer takes for this article. Apparently Peryer only took one. “One click and that was it. It was truly amazing.” When we ask her to stand in front of a piece of art readers will recognise, something from one of the big names, she is quite clear. “Right, well I’d rather not stand in front of a painting as such. I think when we go upstairs I will sit in my chair and you will get a wall of different artists, because to me they’re all special.

“Les and I never bought the art for investment. Selling them now I will be making some gains, but just to take things off and sell them has never been a reason to buy them in the first place. I don’t want to buy signatures. I’ve always said that.”

Older women are often pigeonholed as sweet, grandmotherly types, an easy stereotype which conveniently erases the possibility of hidden depths, of desires and dark sides. Milly is indeed sweet – when we first meet she takes my proffered hand and draws me into a hug – but, like many women of her generation, she has obviously learnt to veil her intelligence and nous, her steely spine, behind gentle surfaces. Les may have been the breadwinner, she the housewife, but, I suspect, this was always a marriage of two equals.

“I have said to Les in the past, ‘Les, we are two ordinary people but we have somehow come together and amassed an extraordinary collection of art.’ And I still feel like that. I have never sought the limelight. And now it’s been thrust upon me, if you like. And I could have said no. But I wanted to do the artists and their work justice. Give them their due. It’s because of them that we have this beautiful collection.” ●