

SHOW US YOUR WALL

Debts of Gratitude Paid in Paintings, Silkscreens and Collages

The novelist Rachel Kushner also writes about art. Her collection is a reminder of those essays and features.

By Brett Sokol

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LOS ANGELES — Few of Rachel Kushner’s artworks were purchased outright. While her Angelino Heights Craftsman-style home, where she lives with her husband, Jason Smith, and their son, Remy, may be an intimately scaled who’s who of contemporary art — including West Coast painters like James Hayward and Laura Owens and New Yorkers like Seth Price and Richard Prince — most of these pieces were received in exchange for her writing.

Ms. Kushner is best known for her wryly brooding novels — “Telex From Cuba” and “The Flamethrowers,” as well as “The Mars Room,” whose prose Dwight Garner of The New York Times compared to a “muscle car oozing down the side roads of your mind.” But she has simultaneously built a sideline as a feature writer on artists for publications like Artforum, as well as an essayist for exhibition catalogs.

When she came to New York from San Francisco in 1996, at 27, she became friends with the painter Alex Brown and subsequently took a deep dive into the downtown art scene. Even after entering Columbia’s M.F.A. writing program, she maintained this affinity: “Artists just seemed more fun and interesting to hang out with,” she said. “They knew a lot about music, they read architecture criticism, they read philosophy. I just felt like I always learned more from being around them socially.”



Diana Thater’s “Shumia” (2008). Elizabeth Weinberg for The New York Times

Barely veiled stand-ins for some of these artists — including Mr. Prince and the painter Ben Morea — appear in her fiction. Accordingly, Ms. Kushner doesn’t see her role as that of a traditionally objective critic: If she trades her writing for artwork, it’s because the artist is someone she admires, or already a friend.

“It’s not a coincidence that a lot of the work has a personal connection,” she said in an interview, gesturing to the drawings, photographs and collages in her living room.

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These are edited excerpts from the conversation.

Tell me about this Wade Guyton piece.

I was at the LA Art Book Fair looking for a birthday present for my husband [a professor at the ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena]. I saw this on the wall behind the table for Karma Books. It's a page torn from a book Wade Guyton did — a reprint of a gay porn magazine which he then printed on [in color]. I asked about the price and it was a bit extravagant. Or, like, a *lot* extravagant. They called Karma's owner, who said I could take it as long as I did some kind of project with them in the future. Well, that demonstrates my love to my husband. I'm signed on to do ... *something*.



Clockwise from upper left: James Hayward's "Smoke #94" (2003); Alex Brown's "Untitled" (1994); Kerry James Marshall's pillowcase "Souvenir I" (1997); and Alex Brown's "Untitled" (1993). Elizabeth Weinberg for The New York Times

You have two paintings by Brown in your dining room, one of a slightly blurred tree and the other of the AT&T building in TriBeCa. What about this work appeals to you?

Well, what about Gerhard Richter's work appeals to *you*? Not to be coy, but it's very German. Alex's grandfather was a German aerospace engineer, and they made a deal with him like they did with Wernher von Braun. He got to come to the United States and design rockets — and not be prosecuted for [World War II] war crimes. Alex was aware he carries the mantle of this inherited trauma. So I think he thought about Richter's work a lot. But he's also just an incredible painter with the nimble, delicate way this windowless "communications" building is rendered.



Rachel Kushner with, on wall, from left, John McAllister's "Palm at the End of the Mind" (2007); Kim Gordon's "Where's My Automation?" (2019); Laura Owens's "Untitled" (2014); and Maria Lassnig's "Erwachen 2007/2008." Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Bildrecht, Vienna; Elizabeth Weinberg for The New York Times



Laura Owens's "Untitled" (2013). Elizabeth Weinberg for The New York Times



Claire Fontaine's "Untitled (Two Hundred and Fifty Redeemed Cans)" (2013). Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOCAN, Montreal; Elizabeth Weinberg for The New York Times

On that wall is a work by Kerry James Marshall with images of assassinated civil rights activists. Is it on cloth?

It's a limited-edition pillowcase [laughing]. I bought it partly because I can't afford a Kerry James Marshall painting, and partly because I saw the painting it's taken from at LACMA [the Los Angeles County Museum of Art] with my father. My dad was looking at the faces, and he goes, "Oh, gee, that's Mickey!" Mickey was his friend who went to Mississippi and was murdered by either state troopers or the Ku Klux Klan, or a combination.

Wait, was Mickey Michael Schwerner, who was killed in 1964 with James Chaney and Andrew Goodman?

Yes, they worked together in the civil rights movement, along with my mother. That's why I loved this painting so much, because Marshall is a caretaker of history and of the sacrifices of these martyrs. I had it here with Alex's paintings above it, before he died. And now it's like Marshall's also tending to the ghost of my friend.