

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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A view of Suvikunta, one of the Zabłudowicz's properties on Sarvisalo Island, Finland. Photography by Jason Schmidt



Caragh Thuring in her cottage-turned-studio at Suvikunta preparing for a solo show opening in November.

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Nicolas Deshayes, Keith Tyson, Caragh Thuring, Erin and Sam Falls, Poju and Anita Zabłudowicz, and Olafur Eliasson and his daughter Alma, with Schieleren (Smears), 2010, by Franz West.

On a remote island in Finland, mega-collectors Anita and Poju Zabłudowicz have established a breathtaking creative oasis.

Perhaps it was the milky light of the night in summer, when the sun barely goes down. Or maybe it was the midnight saunas followed by bracing dunks in the sea. More likely, it was simply the light-headedness that comes from being out of the studio and plunked on a remote island off the southern coast of Finland, with little in sight except sky, water, forest, and fields. Whatever the cause, no one felt much like sleeping—not the rising stars Sam Falls, Caragh Thuring, or Nicolas Deshayes, all artists in residence on the property; nor Olafur Eliasson, who was visiting to scope out sites for a possible commission; nor Keith Tyson, a Turner Prize winner. Tyson’s Large Field Array, a work combining 300 sculptural elements, was soon to be housed in its own enormous barn on the grounds, which are dotted by rustic cabins. “Art camp” is how they all described the place.

Such is the allure of Sarvisalo, home to the family retreat—turned—art colony and sculpture park owned by Anita and Poju Zabłudowicz. Here, perched on the Gulf of Finland, four hours west of St. Petersburg, Russia, the forests of birch and pine are so dense and the oxblood barns and yellow cottages so brightly painted, you half expect “to see elves and trolls,” noted Eliasson, whom the couple had been wooing to make a work for 15 years. As two of the world’s most prominent collectors of contemporary art, the Zabs, as insiders refer to them, occupy an unusual niche in the art world, given their focus on emerging and midcareer artists. “They really support artists before they break through,” says curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, codirector of London’s Serpentine Galleries. “It’s a form of patronage.”

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Complicated, innovative work is a hallmark of the Zabs' collecting style.

At a time of exploding markets and overexposed hot shots, the husband-and-wife team is known not only for buying work early in an artist's career, often when he or she is barely out of school, but also for staying the course. They invest in key pieces, commission permanent works, host residencies, and mount shows at the public exhibition spaces they run with director Elizabeth Neilson and guest curators in London and Manhattan.

"They are often there before anyone else," says the London dealer Stuart Shave, recalling that Anita was an early client of Modern Art, the gallery he opened in 1998 with the late fashion editor Isabella Blow and her husband, Detmar. "Anita lives this; it's not about trophy-hunting, though they have real blue-chip works. They're intrepid risk-taking collectors who are very loyal to the artists they acquire and eager to facilitate something for them."

While the couple's residency program in Poju's native Finland allows artists time to experiment or simply hang out in a bucolic wonderland, their exhibition spaces serve as a kind of launch pad for future art stars. "Their openings attract a very young crowd that you don't see at every other opening; there's this informality," says their friend Simon de Pury, the former chairman of the auction house Phillips de Pury & Company. "There are so many people who will only engage with something that already has been validated by the right curators or acquired by the right collectors. And there isn't any of that." In 2009, after buying *Current Climate, 2008*, by Haroon Mirza, a British artist best known for his acoustic sculptures, Anita included him in two group shows at their outpost in a converted church in North London; in 2011, he won the Silver Lion at the 54th Venice Biennale.

An appetite for complicated, innovative work is a hallmark of the Zabs' collecting style. They didn't flinch when American artist Matthew Day Jackson arrived in Sarvisalo for the first artist residency, in 2010, and asked to create an underground bunker to house a skeleton in a glass coffin he planned to make. ("He presented us the drawing, and that was it; we commissioned him to do it," Anita says.) One of Jackson's fascinations is the human body, particularly his own, since learning in 2006 that he has multiple sclerosis, and he has depicted his own death in a number of works. His bunker skeleton, cast in bronze, was created from trees and branches found on the island, while the head was cast from a model of his own. An architect built a tomb that is reached via a narrow staircase that descends below ground. "We live in a world where art constantly moves all over the place," says Jackson, who has been known to nap in the bunker. "So for an artist to have something that's as permanent as can possibly be is radical. Making that work was important to me, because way beyond my life span that chamber will still be there."

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Happiest in the company of artists, Anita and Poju visit Finland when those they've invited are in residence. They own five properties on Sarvisalo (in addition to a tiny island nearby), which include their modest wood-and-glass family house, several saunas in the woods, cabins, an art barn, and assorted farm buildings. Everyone eats together buffet-style at Suvikunta, a former writers' compound that serves as the base camp. "We love the adventure and the journey and the conversation," Anita told me one sunny morning in June as we sat on the pier there. Lively and earthy, with an easy laugh and curious mind, she had just finished chatting with Caragh Thuring, a Belgian-born British painter whose work the Zabs have been collecting for years. Thuring was working in a cottage in preparation for a solo show opening in November at London's influential Chisenhale Gallery. As Anita settled into a wicker chair, she described her marathon schedule of art fairs, studio visits, and research—she receives some 1,000 JPEGs a day—and her refusal to sell work or speculate on future stars. "You want not just to acquire what the artists make, but build a relationship with them," she said, her auburn hair whipping around her face in the wind. "Their work becomes part of your life."

"There's quite an intense relationship to the artists they're involved with," notes Hauser & Wirth's Iwan Wirth. The gallerist, who owns a cabin on an island not far from Sarvisalo, credits Anita with putting Jackson on his radar. "Anita is like Peggy Guggenheim, in that sort of mad closeness to an artist, and the directness and openness she has. She'll tell you exactly what she thinks of a work, which is rare."

This fall (through December 21), the Zabłudowicz Collection kicks off its 20th anniversary in London with the first U.K. solo exhibition of Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch, whose absurdist video installations parody the post-Internet age with over-the-top ensemble acting, cross-dressing, and fractured story lines that explore reality television and queer culture. The centerpiece is Priority Innfield (Fence, Pole, Tilt, Villa, Way), 2013, five unique immersive installations by Trecartin and Fitch, which the Zabs bought before it was completed for its premiere at the 2013 Venice Biennale as part of Massimiliano Gioni's exhibition "The Encyclopedic Palace." Anita purchased her first Trecartin video in 2011 from the artist's dealer at the time, Elizabeth Dee, after seeing his work at the 2010 Liverpool Biennial and thinking, "This is something I've never seen, and it's revolutionary," she recalled. By then, Trecartin was already a darling, and the opportunities to buy new pieces had grown more competitive. The couple managed to acquire a few but also paid several visits to the "group" home in Los Angeles he shares with Fitch and others in their merry band of collaborators. "You could feel the excitement they had for the way we constructed our lives and ran our studio," Trecartin says. "We really wanted to do something with them." When his new dealers, Andrea Rosen and Shaun Caley Regen, offered them his Venice piece if they purchased it sight unseen, they jumped. "We knew what they were capable of," Anita told me. "So we took the risk. But we didn't think it was really a risk."

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The idea for the Finnish residency came to the Zabs in 2007, following a visit to Naoshima, the Japanese island known for its museums and art sites designed by the architect Tadao Ando. “I was surprised by how contrived it was. We thought we could do it in a much more organic way,” Anita said as she led me around the grounds of Suvikunta, pointing out the bright blue loop-de-loop sculpture by Franz West by the water, and one of the nine white benches by Jeppe Hein integrated into the landscape. Emerging from the woods and camouflaged by its copper patina was Berserker 1, a giant mythical creature by the German artist Stella Hamberg. None of these had been made in situ, but others, like Jackson’s, were the work of artists invited to respond to the couple’s personal patch of Finland. The British artist Richard Woods, for example, took a 19th-century cottage and covered its facade with fake stonework in Pop colors, a riff on the stone cladding put on British suburban homes to make them look rustic. Inside, he hung paintings of brick walls in place of the more customary idyllic landscapes.

Not far from where we sat, new projects were under way in a rustic cabin, where Sam Falls, 30, was hanging canvases to dry on a line he’d rigged. Lanky and soft-spoken, he wore black jeans and a loose black T-shirt; his brown hair fell past his shoulders. Falls specializes in paintings and sculptures that allude to the time and place in which they’re made. It had been drizzling all week—just the conditions he’d been hoping to encounter. On his arrival two weeks earlier, he had spied a field of blooming apple trees and was soon laying canvases under them to catch the petals. He then spread dry pigment over all of them, as if sprinkling flour on a pastry board. The rain, he said, “makes the work—instead of the painter with a brush.” Once the canvases dried, he’d shake off the petals, leaving behind empty spaces. “For me, it’s about nature and subtracting myself from the equation.” These so-called rain paintings completed a series begun in Vermont and Los Angeles and were included in three shows by the artist that opened this fall—at Galerie Eva Presenhuber in Zurich; at Hannah Hoffman Gallery, in Los Angeles; and at the Pomona College Museum of Art, in Claremont, California.

As with many of the artists she collects, Anita had barely heard of Falls when she first bought one of his pieces, after coming across it at an art fair in Brussels in 2012. “I had seen this very big tire work of his a year earlier during Art Basel Miami Beach, and I was like a moth to a flame,” she said. Other purchases followed before she offered Falls a solo show in North London this past June. “He is so experimental that you just want to follow what he’s doing all the time,” she said. “Artists these days feel like they have to perform—there’s a lot of ‘let’s see what you do next,’” Falls said. “Anita’s got your back. She’s consistently bought the more difficult works. It’s like she can really catch the zeitgeist of what I’m doing.”

The only child of a teacher and a Newcastle, England, businessman, Anita had no background in contemporary art when she met Poju at a friend’s engagement party in 1987. She was 27 and working

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as a project manager for an interior design firm; he was a Finnish-born property tycoon on his way to becoming one of the wealthiest men in London. On their second date, he invited her to Finland to meet his parents. “I’m not sure if I fell in love with Poju or with Finland first,” she recalled of seeing Sarvisalo, where Poju’s family had spent every summer since he was a child. “It was so idyllic, and I loved the family.”

Poju’s father, Shlomo, was born into a rabbinical family in Poland and had survived Auschwitz; his parents and seven siblings all perished. He met Poju’s mother, Pola, also a Holocaust survivor, in a Swedish refugee camp. They married in Israel the year it was founded and relocated to southern Finland, near the site of Tampella, the Finnish manufacturing and weapons plant where Shlomo landed a job. Before long, he introduced Finnish industrial know-how to Israel and was instrumental in building the country’s defense infrastructure. In 1990, soon after Anita and Poju married, Poju took the reins of the family holding company, which by then had long divested itself from defense. Now a global equity firm focused on technology and real estate, his Tamares Group reportedly owns 40 percent of the land in downtown Las Vegas, as well as a Finnish hockey team.

For all their global access, the Zabs are most at home on Sarvisalo.

These days the couple and their four grown kids live in Hampstead, in the art-filled home they built on Bishops Avenue, London’s “Billionaires’ Row,” where their neighbors are sheikhs and ambassadors. Chez Zabłudowicz, wood, stone, and glass predominate, a nod to Poju’s Scandinavian roots, though the house was designed by a Scottish architect and inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright’s Fallingwater. (“Who builds a contemporary Scandinavian house in London?” Iwan Wirth quips admiringly.) Its focal point, of course, is their collection, which they began in 1994, once they started a family and Anita quit her job to begin studying modern art at Christie’s. At first they dabbled in British masters, but after Poju bought a Matthew Barney photograph in New York, they flung themselves into contemporary art. Works by Takashi Murakami, Tracey Emin, and Wade Guyton soon followed.

The collection now numbers about 3,000 pieces by 600 artists, and is particularly strong in photography, digital works, and British art. It also includes blue chip pieces by Sigmar Polke, Per Kirkeby, and Albert Oehlen, to name a few, that don’t align with Anita’s more cutting-edge taste. “It’s the same collection, but Poju also likes to buy the more established, while I’m much more daring,” she said. Still, at Frieze in New York this past May, the two snapped up three sculptures by Isa Genzken, then the subject of a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. “There’s a moment, and then the moment’s gone,” Anita told me in New York a few days later about acting on instinct. “I go the wrong way around in art history. I start with the young artists and then trace back to their influences.”

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It's taken years for them to be considered seriously by the art world. (Anita recalls being on the wait list from 1995 to 2001 for a Peter Doig painting and then turning it down because for the price she could buy a number of works by young artists.) Now a fixture of the art establishment—their yacht is a regular sight near the Giardini during the Venice Biennale—the two are known for their largesse and extensive contacts. They are patrons of the Camden Arts Centre; and Anita is a trustee at the Tate Foundation (where Poju had a gallery named in her honor for her 40th birthday), supports curating programs at Goldsmiths College, and cochairs the Legacy List, the organization that oversees the arts programming of Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. Several years ago, London Mayor Boris Johnson personally tapped her for the job after first floating his own ideas. “I told him they were absolute shit,” Anita recalled. “He loved that—and said, ‘You do it, then.’”

Her husband, meanwhile, is a major supporter of Israel. At their home three years ago, he arranged a secret meeting between Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli President Shimon Peres, with whom he has long been close. This past June, the week before he and Anita arrived in Finland, they dined with Bill Clinton. Madonna and her kids have been guests on Sarvisalo; the day I was leaving the island, Steve and Andrea Wynn were mooring their boat and heading over.

But for all their global access, the Zabs are most at home on Sarvisalo; it's the place where their passions come into focus. One night I joined them, their children Tiffany and Roy, and Sam Falls and his wife, Erin, on the beach for drinks. We all sat on beanbag chairs as the sun kind of set and the sky barely dimmed. At dinner, Poju playfully recalled driving around Las Vegas with Robert De Niro and showing him the Plaza Hotel & Casino, which Poju owns. “So I asked Bob if he'd ever seen the movie Casino. And he said, I am the movie!” Soon, Anita had coaxed Erin into singing Gershwin's “Summertime” and Sam into describing the ideas he had in mind for a boathouse on the property. As the conversation turned from neon-lit canoes to the Zabs' upcoming trip to Art Basel in Switzerland, Anita frowned for a second. “There are too many players now, and they've moved into my field. I used to have it to myself. Anyway, it's impossible to have the perfect collection,” she added after a pause. “You just have to tell a good story with what you have.”

<http://www.wmagazine.com/culture/art-and-design/2014/10/anita-and-poju-zabludowicz-finland-art-collection/photos/>