

SOME CONSIDER
IT AN INVESTMENT;
OTHERS CALL
IT A COLLECTION.
EITHER WAY, MORE
AND MORE SMART
MONEY IS MAKING
ITS WAY ONTO
THE WALLS

paint

by numbers

>> by Jessica Werb

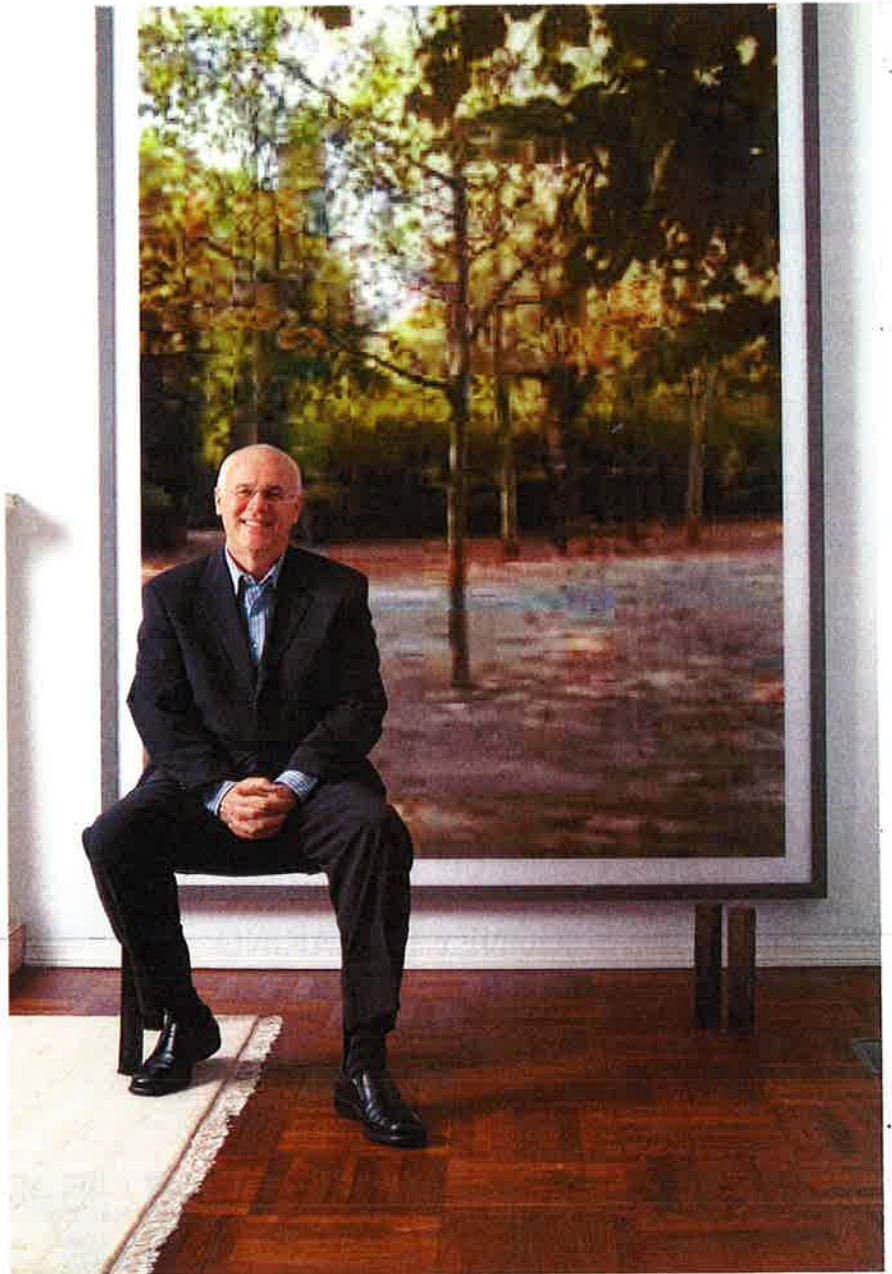
>> photograph by Paul Joseph



With

his sober business attire and pleasant, clean-shaven, middle-aged looks, Laing Brown comes across just as you'd expect any well-respected lawyer to: trustworthy, intelligent and professional. He's a partner at Borden Ladner Gervais LLP, and the few pieces of art on his walls are tasteful and in keeping with the beige surroundings. A stylish aluminum sculpture by Micah Lexier hangs on one wall, while a large, ornately framed pencil drawing by Attila Richard Lukas in the manner of the old Renaissance masters takes up most of another. Brown's home, though, tells a different story. There you'll find an enormous, highly pixelated, two-and-a-half-by-two-metre Thomas Ruff photograph of a tree that will make you think you need stronger glasses, and a neon piece (*see p. 96*) by Vancouver conceptual artist Ron Terada based on the U.S. Homeland Security warning system. The latter features the words SEVERE, HIGH, ELEVATED, GUARDED and LOW illuminated in shades ranging from green to bright red.

But the real showstopper in Brown's collection is a piece by British *enfant terrible* Martin Creed: a metre-long white neon sign spelling the word 'assholes' in 15-centimetre-high capital letters, glowing as brightly as a Las Vegas marquee. Clearly, Brown isn't a man defined by his conservative office milieu. He's defined by his passion – and that passion is contemporary art. And as one of Vancouver's more prominent art collectors, he's in good company. B.C.'s art scene is currently experiencing a surge of activity; from Meinhardt Fine Foods' Linda Meinhardt to chairman of Polygon Homes Michael Audain, the number of buyers swarming local galleries and dealers is at an all-time high.



FROM ARTHUR LISMER TO A-HOLES: Lawyer Laing Brown's tastes have evolved towards edgier conceptual pieces

Laing Brown, who has sold pieces through Heffel, has focused his collection solely on contemporary art, the Martin Creed piece being just one of the gems in his possession and likely the most controversial. "Contemporary art, unlike historical art, [is] about our time. It's when we live," he says. "It's kind of fun to be participating in it when it's being made. It's exciting to be on the hunt and see what's new." He explains that when he and his wife began thinking about art, they considered Group of Seven works only to realize that they were mostly inaccessible due to price and availability. "The alternatives were to buy followers of the Group of Seven that painted after they did, or to buy contemporary. I thought if we did a good job, we could buy what we thought was the best of contemporary."

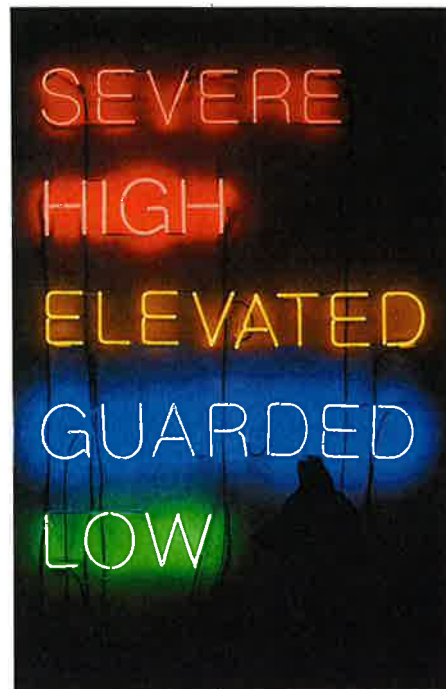
Today Brown's collection includes, in addition to the conversation-stopping Creed piece, works by Ontario artist John McEwen and Toronto painter, sculptor and filmmaker Michael Snow. Worried that the Creed piece might be misunderstood, Brown takes pains to explain the context of the work. When Creed won the \$42,000 Turner Prize in 2001 for an installation that consisted solely of an empty room in London's Tate Modern gallery in which the lights flashed on and off, it caused an uproar in the art world. The neon sign, which sits above a staircase in Brown's home (he agreed with his wife that it should not be placed in the living room), is one of a set of three and, explains Brown, is a statement by Creed against his critics and the art establishment. "I like pieces with some edge, some toughness, some power," he insists. "I'm not really into decorative things."

That said, Brown is also very selective about which pieces of art he acquires. Everything is first vetted by his two daughters and his wife and must fit into his current collection. Another of his important rules is to stay within his means. "I have a limited amount of space, and I have a limited amount of money," he explains bluntly. The idea is "to minimize what you're spending. But you're much better off buying the better works than getting a good deal on a lesser work." If something isn't up on his walls, Brown says he'll deaccession it by selling it through a dealer or at auction or, more commonly, by donating it to a museum. There are financial incentives; selling results in immediate cash flow (but capital gains tax) while donating a work of art to a public institution allows you to offset the value of the donated work against whatever income tax you owe. And what does one do with the extra money? Well, if you're anywhere near as obsessed as Brown is, the answer is a no-brainer: you buy more art. One of his most recent acquisitions – the Thomas Ruff tree photograph – was purchased after space and money were freed up through a donation to the Vancouver Art Gallery and the sale of a couple of works through the Heffel Fine Art Auction House.

It seems that once a collector, always a collector. "It's definitely a passion and it's also an obsession," admits Brown.

Brown can certainly relate. "My mother used to say that we have all the luxuries and none of the necessities," he muses. "We wouldn't have an electric can-opener or a new car, but we have some pretty important pieces of art."

Still, for the truly passionate, it's a price worth paying over and over again, even if it means you drive a piece of junk while your art-filled home is rigged with a Cadillac security system. And while there are many who might scoff at Brown's spending what was likely a few thousand dollars for a glowing expletive, it's worth remembering that one of Pablo Picasso's most haunting and enduring works, *Guernica*, was initially greeted with overwhelming derision. The mural was created for the Spanish pavilion of the 1937 World's Fair, where one tour guide even described it as "a hodgepodge of body parts that any four year old could have painted." So stifle your guffaws. Thirty years from now Laing Brown and his compelling neon sign may well be having the last laugh. ■



YES, IT'S ART: Celebrated conceptual artist Ron Terada's take on the U.S. security system

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