

AUTHENTICATION
IN ART

AiA news-service

The New York Times

Art Disappears in Private Hands. Can Social Media Resurface It?

Private art collections are notoriously secretive. A collective website aims to make them viewable by all.



Jessica and Evrim Oralkan, the founders of Collecteurs, a website that bills itself as “The Collective Museum of Private Collections.” Credit Rose Marie Cromwell for The New York Times

By Sophie Haigney

- Aug. 14, 2019

The private art collection of Roberto Toscano and his wife, Nadia Toscano-Palon, features works by artists including Daniel Turner, Anish Kapoor, James Turrell and Oscar Tuazon. Since 2012, the collection has grown to more than 100 works, which are partly in storage because of renovations — and, like most private collections, are rarely seen by anyone outside of the couple’s immediate circle.

This is a problem for many collectors, Mr. Toscano included, who want to show their work to broader audiences or believe that there’s a public good to sharing the work they own. Though collectors at the highest end of the market are increasingly opening private museums, it can be difficult to afford or staff a space. Private collections can often be so opaque, Mr. Toscano said, that even artists don’t know where their own works are — part of his motivation to make that general information public.

“If I don’t put them in some kind of public database, these works essentially disappear from the planet,” he said.

Enter [Collecteurs, a website and social media platform](#) that’s boldly billing itself as “The Collective Museum of Private Collections.” Collecteurs, based out of the [New Museum’s NEW INC.](#), a cultural incubator, is a public benefit corporation with a stated mission to bring artwork into the light — at least, the light of the internet. Its founders are Jessica and Evrim Oralkan, married collectors who became overwhelmed by the size of their own trove of art. They were struggling to manage it, and share it with the public. “You get to a point where your walls can’t take anymore art,” Mr. Oralkan said.

The Oralkans have uploaded their personal collection online, as have Mr. Toscano and about 1,200 others. Anyone with a computer can now scroll through images of the work they own. Using and accessing it at a basic level is free. But users can sign up for two higher-tier plans (one at \$15 a month and another at \$125 a month) that provide access to features like passes to art fairs and the opportunity to be interviewed for the site’s editorial platform.

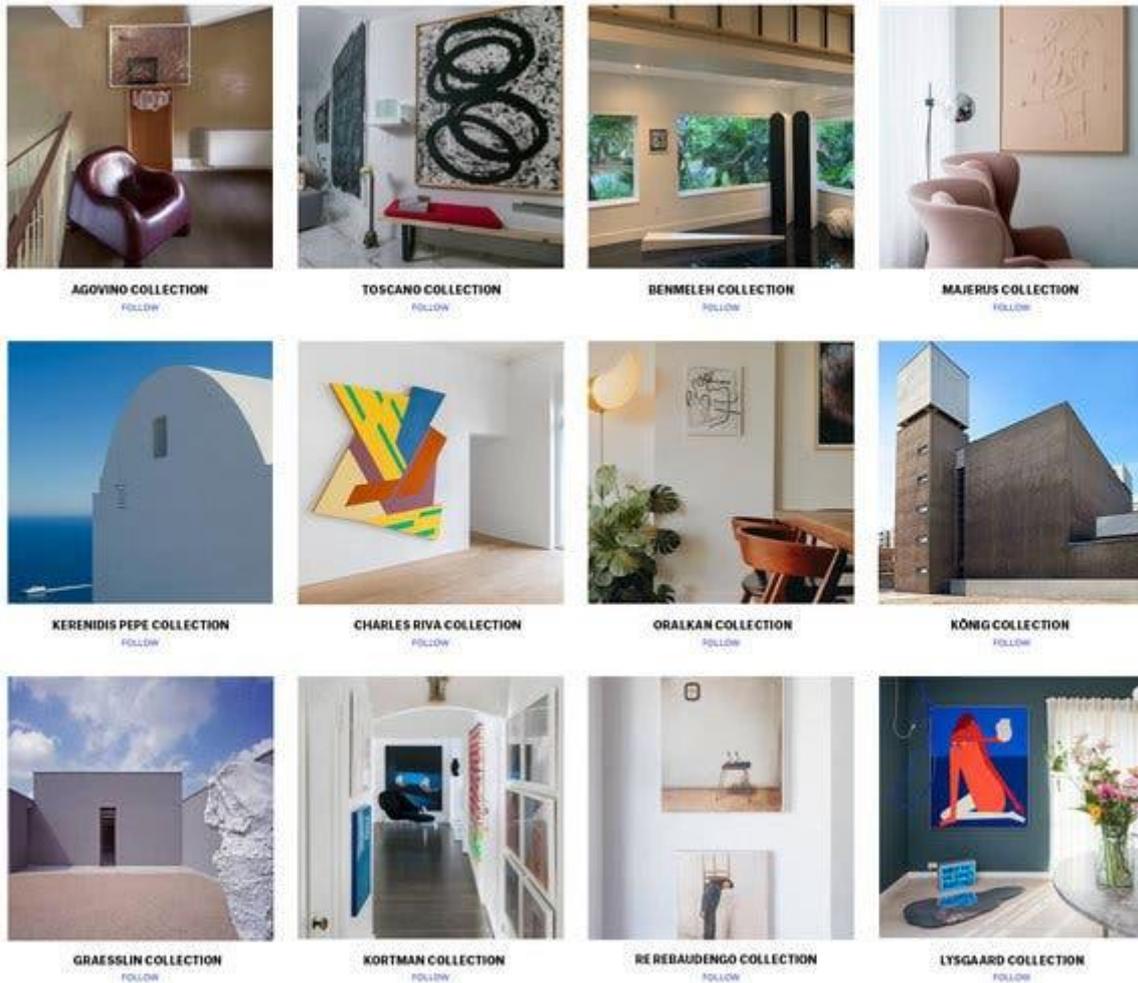
In addition to sharing, art collectors are seeking tools to organize growing collections, connect online with gallerists and curators and, perhaps, to humblebrag about what’s on their walls.

“Collecting used to almost be like a private club with people who were very traditional in their privacy and comportment,” Ronald Varney, an independent fine art adviser in New York, said in an interview this week. “Nowadays, it’s often, ‘How much publicity can I get out of this?’”

Collecteurs is attempting to harness the energy of social media without all of its associated noise, and offer a window into the secretive and exclusive world of private collections. Though the amount of art in private hands is unquantifiable, art sales have been increasing, reaching [\\$67.4 billion in 2018](#), much of it passing between private hands. Mr. Varney called the world of private collections a “murky universe” since private sales are not reported, and auction houses are not required to divulge the names of winning bidders.

“There was a work by a very prominent contemporary artist and this work was sold at a major sale at Christie’s a few years ago, that was featured prominently in the news,” Mr. Varney said. “After it was sold, the piece was listed as ‘missing’ on the artist’s website, because they know who sold it but not who bought it, and that work has just vanished into a private collection.”

COLLECTIONS ON Collecteurs



A view of a collection page on the Collecteurs website, which offers a rare look at collections that might otherwise be in storage. Credit Richard Serra/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Sam Durant/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Merely by its nature, Collecteurs has an obvious limitation: The art can only be seen online. “Not everybody has the resources to open a private museum,” Mr. Oralkan said. “So people are looking for alternative options, and those are most likely going to be digital.”

Collecteurs is trying to be at once a management software; a social media platform; an online magazine with plans for print books down the road; and, more nebulously, an online museum for the public. Its founders say that the platform isn’t geared toward buying and selling, but rather it’s another way of getting access to information about where art is.

The concept of a “digital museum” isn’t really new. Many museums have long been digitizing their collections so that anyone with an internet connection can scroll through images of the art. But when does something grow from a collection of images online to an online museum, and does Collecteurs qualify?

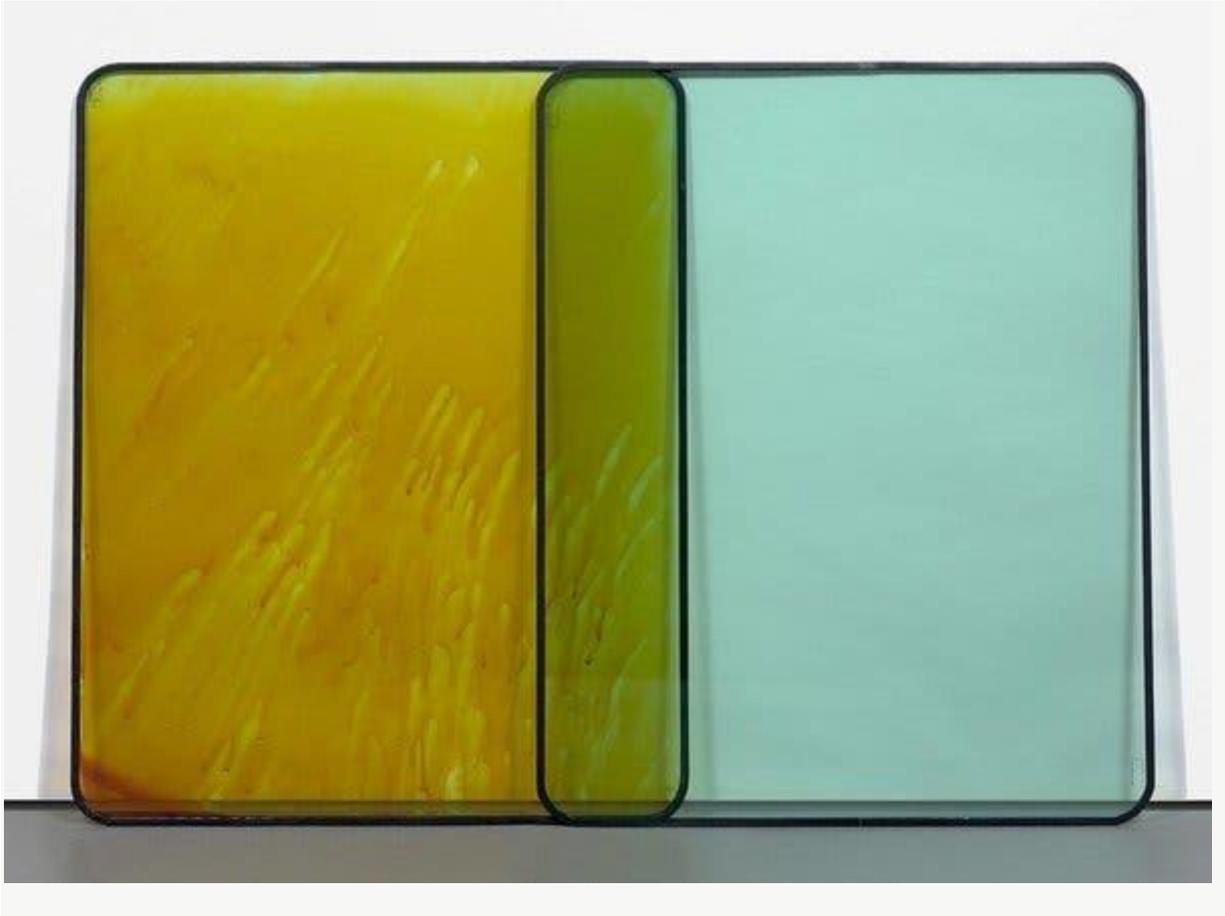
“This is really not a museum by any stretch of the definition,” said [Claire Bishop, a professor of art history](#) at the Graduate Center at the City University of New York, who has researched and written about the effects of digital technology on visual art. She said the lack of emphasis on research, the shortage of contextual information about objects and the absence of extensive curation make Collecteurs more social network than museum. The information on the website is self-reported, so it can be as robust or as limited as a collector chooses; often, collectors include dimensions, medium, artist, materials and exhibition history. Sometimes, they add notes and can curate digital exhibitions of their works.

“If the minimum definition of a digital museum is a collection of jpegs online, then an online archive like [Artstor](#) is the greatest digital museum on earth,” Ms. Bishop said, referring to a nonprofit digital image library that has amassed millions of images for scholarly use. The use of the word “museum,” she said, is a misnomer, and lends the project cachet while misrepresenting its aims.

Mr. Oralkan emphasized that Collecteurs is a hybrid platform, one that’s driven by aspirations to change how art can be seen and shared. “I think we really have a chance to recreate the idea of what a museum can be,” he said. Ms. Oralkan said, “If we’re looking at either not being seen at all or being seen digitally, digital is a very strong point to make.”

In recent years, Instagram has become a favored way for collectors to share and search for new work. It [has also helped some artists, like Cj Hendry](#), start their careers outside of traditional channels. Mr. Toscano used to rely on Instagram to seek out artists, but he said he’s grown frustrated with the algorithm. “Every four posts someone is trying to sell me something that has nothing to do with any of my interests,” he said.

Collecteurs is semi-exclusive; anyone can join and post images, but some members are preapproved based on the content of the collection, allowing them to show up in the site’s search function. (Quality matters to the founders: “We don’t want a Mickey Mouse collector showing Donald Duck art,” Mr. Oralkan said.) Viewers can search the site — by artist, by collection, by keyword, by hashtag — a feature that Mr. Toscano has used to search for otherwork by the artists he collects — art that might be in other collections.



“Untitled, Pylamyra (4/16/12),” by the artist Daniel Turner, from the Toscano Collection on Collecteurs.CreditToscano Collection
Image



Oscar Tuazon's "TBT (Model & Plans for Munster)," from the Toscano Collection on Collecteurs.CreditToscano Collection

Image



Oscar Tuazon's "MODEL" for outdoor sculpture, from the Toscano Collection. Credit Toscano Collection

But not everyone is interested in showing off what they have in vaults or on their walls. "People aren't necessarily looking for the sharing aspect," Justin Anthony, one of the founders of a Denver-based company called [Artwork Archive](#), said. There is a cloud-based inventory system, used by artists, collectors and large institutions for organization and management: Users track what they have and where the works are, along with deeds of title and insurance papers. "I would say there's kind of a sexy,

interesting aspect to this and a practical aspect. The unsexy side, the management side, is a more common itch than the desire to share.”

Often, in fact, clients would rather their collections not be shared. “We were just dealing with three different political figures who don’t want to draw attention to their wealth, and they wanted to be assured that no one could trace it back to them,” he said. There’s a function on Artwork Archive that enables sharing artwork with the public, but the majority of users keep their collections private or between family and friends.

Mr. Varney noted that there’s a growing gap between collectors who post their work online and others who are “going radically in the other direction.” One client didn’t even want auction houses to know what state he lived in.

As for Collecteurs, Mr. Oralkan explained that the site has digital security features, which might allay people’s fears of being tracked down and robbed. And if a user doesn’t want to share a work publicly, they can set it to private mode or share it anonymously.

(Additionally, those who pay for the highest-level plan can include data that’s client-side encrypted — like information about pricing, specific storage locations or other details that might make a work vulnerable to theft.)

The kind of reticence Mr. Varney describes has been the biggest challenge for Mr. and Ms. Oralkan in getting people to join Collecteurs. “At the beginning, we got a lot of pushback,” Ms. Oralkan said. “Like, No. 1, who are you? And No. 2, why do you want this information?”

She said that they had instituted a feature to allow people to share anonymously, and that as the platform has grown, it has been easier to convince prospective users to join the site. The two are planning a book of uploaded collections, “Socially Conscious Collectors,” which has been an incentive for users, especially given the death of some glossy home magazines — where homes and art might have been featured in splashy spreads. (Ad [revenue in magazines fell to around \\$28 billion in 2017 from \\$46 billion dollars in 2007](#), according to Statista, an industry newsletter.)

Mr. Varney said he does believe social media will open up the art market and add more transparency. “Things just sort of vanish into private collections,” he said. “When things appear on the market, especially older things that have been off the market forever, it’s almost like a discovery story.”

Correction: Aug. 15, 2019

An earlier version of this article described incorrectly a type of magazine advertising spending that has seen a sharp decline between 2007 and 2017. It was magazine ad spending over all, not home magazine spending.