

Trevor Traina photo collection at the de Young

Steven Winn

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Like many passions, it came on unexpectedly and unforeseen. In this case, the fixation stayed on simmer for a while before it boiled over.

Fresh out of college (Oxford and Princeton) in 1992, San Francisco native Trevor Traina was working in Manhattan as a brand manager for Seagram's when the company's photography curator came by with a print to hang in Traina's office. The image was a shot of New York, "View West From Park Avenue and 55th Street," by Nicholas Nixon.

"Of course, I didn't know who he was at the time," Traina, 44, said breezily the other day at his home in Pacific Heights.

It would be another decade before Traina would pay serious attention to Nixon or any other photographer. But when he did, after purchasing "View," along with a print by the great photojournalist Weegee in 2003, there was no turning back. Assembled in less than a decade and still growing, Traina's formidable and thoughtfully focused collection is the source of "Real to Real: Photographs From the Traina Collection," opening Saturday at the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum.

Studded with classic works by Lee Friedlander, Walker Evans, Diane Arbus, Robert Frank and Garry Winogrand, the Traina holdings are especially rich in color works that both express and explore the nature of the medium's documentary power. Many of the major names are present and accounted for - an eerily playful self-portrait by Cindy Sherman, William Eggleston's iconic red ceiling and bare lightbulb, heroically scaled crowd scenes by Andreas Gursky, a mordantly radiant light box by Jeff Wall.

But photographic reality also tilts into strange, comic and provocative dimensions. Mike Kelly serves up a painterly phantasmagoria in his "Butter-Colored Vision of the Land O'Lakes Girl, Peche Island." David LaChapelle's "Cathedral" offers a dreamily theatrical spin on devotional religious paintings. A store clerk is the compelling still point in a rainbow vortex of brand-name consumer culture in Alex Soth's "Dynell."

"Photographs today are variously, knowingly layered," writes independent curator and Traina Collection adviser Kevin Moore, in a book that accompanies the show, "the real buried under veils of different kinds of representation, be it artistic, commercial, scientific, historic, touristic, filmic." It's an apt description of the "Real to Real" aesthetic.

Traina is a lively host as he ushers a visitor through a series of large downstairs galleries and up into his family's living space, walls that will soon be largely bare after the de Young show is installed. Each photograph has its own kind of specific, textured reality for him. Stopping in front of Arbus' famous "Identical Twins," he remarks of an image that might register as faintly creepy to others, "I find them cheery, sweet little girls - charming and fun and witty."

The fallen subject of Joel Sternfeld's "Exhausted Renegade Elephant" struck his wife, Alexis, as "sad," says Traina. "In my mind, even in collapse, the elephant has a kind of dignity." Peering intently at the tiny faces of a Gursky soccer stadium crowd that fills a stairwell wall, the delighted owner compares the towering photograph to a finished novel. "I really had to fight to get this one," he adds.

"I love photographs where there's a whole story in the picture," says Traina, "like a poem or a puzzle." He's even happy to admit when the puzzle doesn't work out as he imagined. Learning that Eggleston's famous red ceiling hadn't been carefully composed but instead casually shot by the photographer while he was lying on a bed, Traina says with a wistful shrug, "I was a little bit devastated." Surprise and freshness are very close to the surface of his reactions.

For all his boyish enthusiasm, Traina has developed an analytical sensibility. His reading of Soth's "The Seneca," a stark nighttime motel study, homes in on the picture's structural armature - the way the heavy curtains in the windows hang, the position and color of the plastic chairs out front, a crack in the asphalt parking lot aimed directly at one of the doors.

In some ways, Traina's seemingly accidental discovery of his drive to collect may have been predestined. His father, John Traina (who died last year), was a world-class collector of Fabergé. His mother is Dede Wilsey, a collector and board president of the Fine Arts Museums, which comprises the de Young and the Legion of Honor. His father presented him with an Ansel Adams as a gift. His mother has given him several paintings.

"I grew up in a family of collectors," he says, "so I understand the illness of collecting." Now his friends tell him how much they've learned about him by the photographs he selects.

Traina, who has founded four technology companies, is a self-described "omnivore" who loves painting, sculpture, architecture and design. A centerpiece of the Georgian house he and his wife renovated is a glass conservatory imported from England.

"Life is boring if you don't surround yourself with beautiful things," he says. "If I couldn't afford the photographs, I'd buy the posters. And if I couldn't afford those, I'd have the postcards."

Traina lingers in front of a 2006 double portrait by Larry Sultan. Traina himself and his wife, posed in their bedroom with their two dogs, are the subjects. Once again Traina embarks on a careful dissection, pointing

out the complex lighting and flowers in the background, a bared sliver of Alexis' back and "the way the two dogs increase the tension." But what he relishes most, it seems, is having been present and part of the creation.

"It took an entire day for Larry to set it up and get the lighting and everything else just right," says Traina. "I didn't mind at all. I knew what he wanted. He wanted to get a Larry Sultan photograph."

Real to Real: Photographs From the Traina Collection: Saturday-Sept 16. M.H. de Young Museum, Golden Gate Park, S.F. \$10. (415) 750-3600. www.deyoungmuseum.org.

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