

## Collecting can be a smart, affordable investment

Story by Susan Abram

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Designer Geneen Estrada shows off paintings by Lorser Feitelson at the Louis Stern Fine Arts gallery. (Photo by Hans Gutknecht)

It can start with one piece: a Warhol print, a Wedgwood porcelain vase or an American Girl doll. Then, as fascination evolves to passion, one piece begets another and another, until the grouping of items becomes a collection. It just goes to show that collecting need not be solely for the elite. In a tight economy, even fine art has become affordable, says Geneen Estrada, owner of Los Angeles' Estrada Fine Art and a member of the American Society of Interior Designers. "I talk to young people in their 30s about starting a collection and I tell them, 'If you forego going out one day a month, you can afford a piece of art,'" Estrada says. "Can you imagine the collection they would have in a year?"

Many people believe they cannot afford the works by the kinds of artists Estrada represents - the well-established, mid-career craftsmen who have specialized in painting, sculpture and photography for at least a quarter-century. But a novice collector with a modest income can start with smaller pieces, says Estrada, who notes that even wealthy collectors have scaled back their acquisitions. "For a while, emerging art was expensive because what was happening with the economy," Estrada says. Those with the means purchased art as an investment, driving prices so high that no one else could afford them. Then, much like the real estate boom, the market for artwork deflated. Nowadays, new collectors may be able to purchase pieces that cost 30 percent less than in previous years.

Estrada suggests that aspiring collectors visit museums and chat with curators or visit galleries to identify the styles and colors they favor - and those they don't. "It's so easy to research now, using the Internet," she says. Even if the artwork is an investment, Estrada said it's best to choose a piece that excites. "If you buy a piece of art as an investment you still have to love it," she says. "What would you rather hang on your wall - a piece of art, or a stock certificate?"