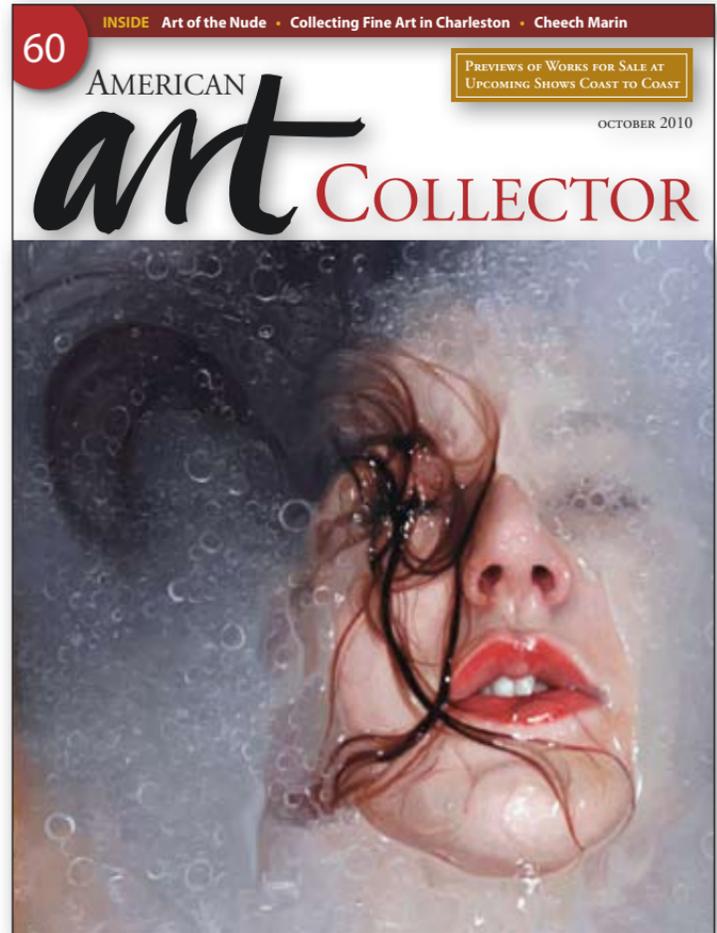
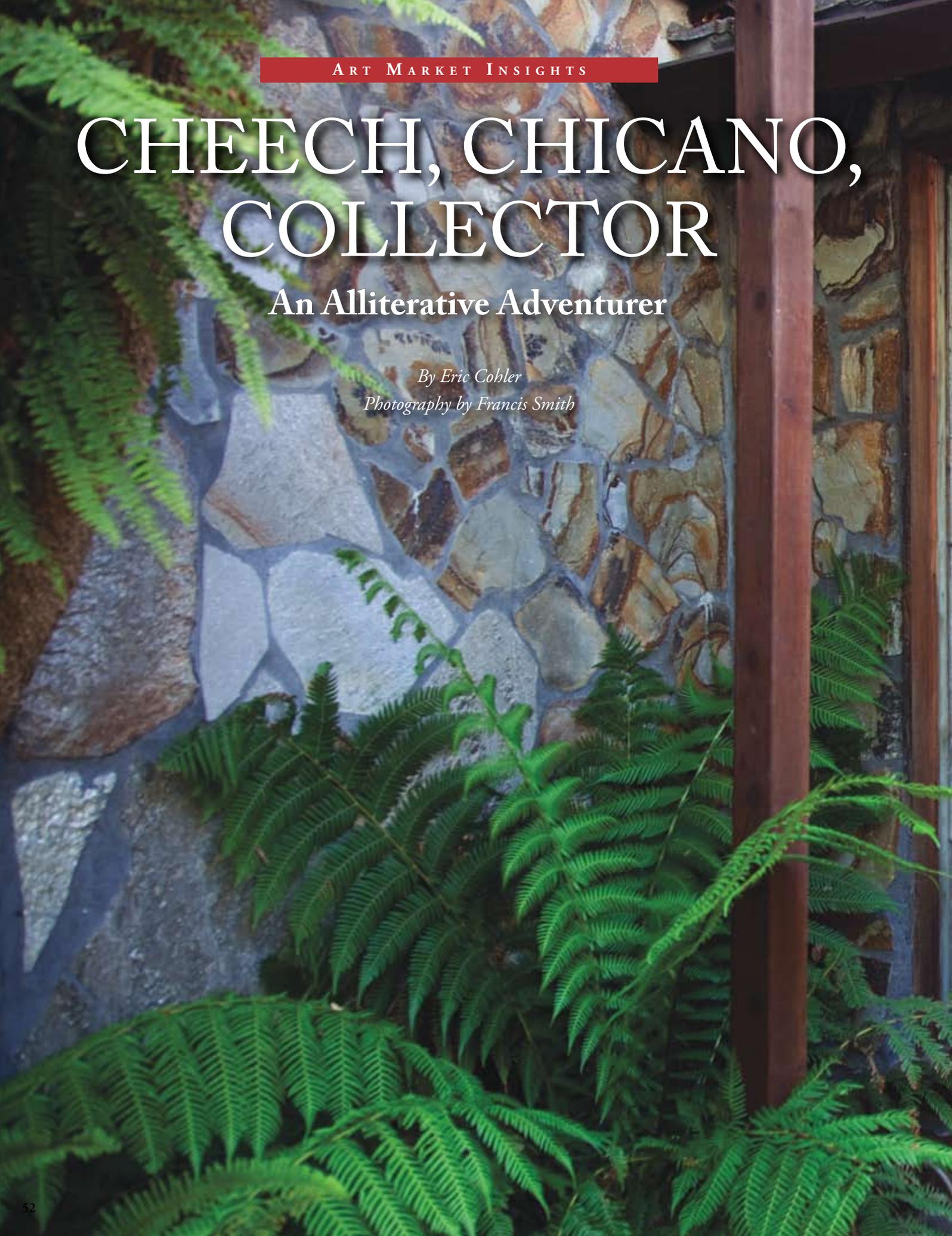


As seen in the
October 2010 issue of

 AMERICAN
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A photograph of a stone wall with ferns and a wooden post. The wall is made of irregularly shaped stones in shades of brown, tan, and grey, set in a dark grey mortar. Several bright green ferns are growing in front of the wall, some reaching up towards the top. A vertical wooden post is visible on the right side of the frame. The overall scene is outdoors and appears to be a garden or courtyard.

ART MARKET INSIGHTS

CHEECH, CHICANO, COLLECTOR

An Alliterative Adventurer

By Eric Cohler

Photography by Francis Smith



As seen through the front door of Cheech Marin's Malibu, California, home, a sculpture by Einar and Jamex de la Torre, *El Astronauta*.

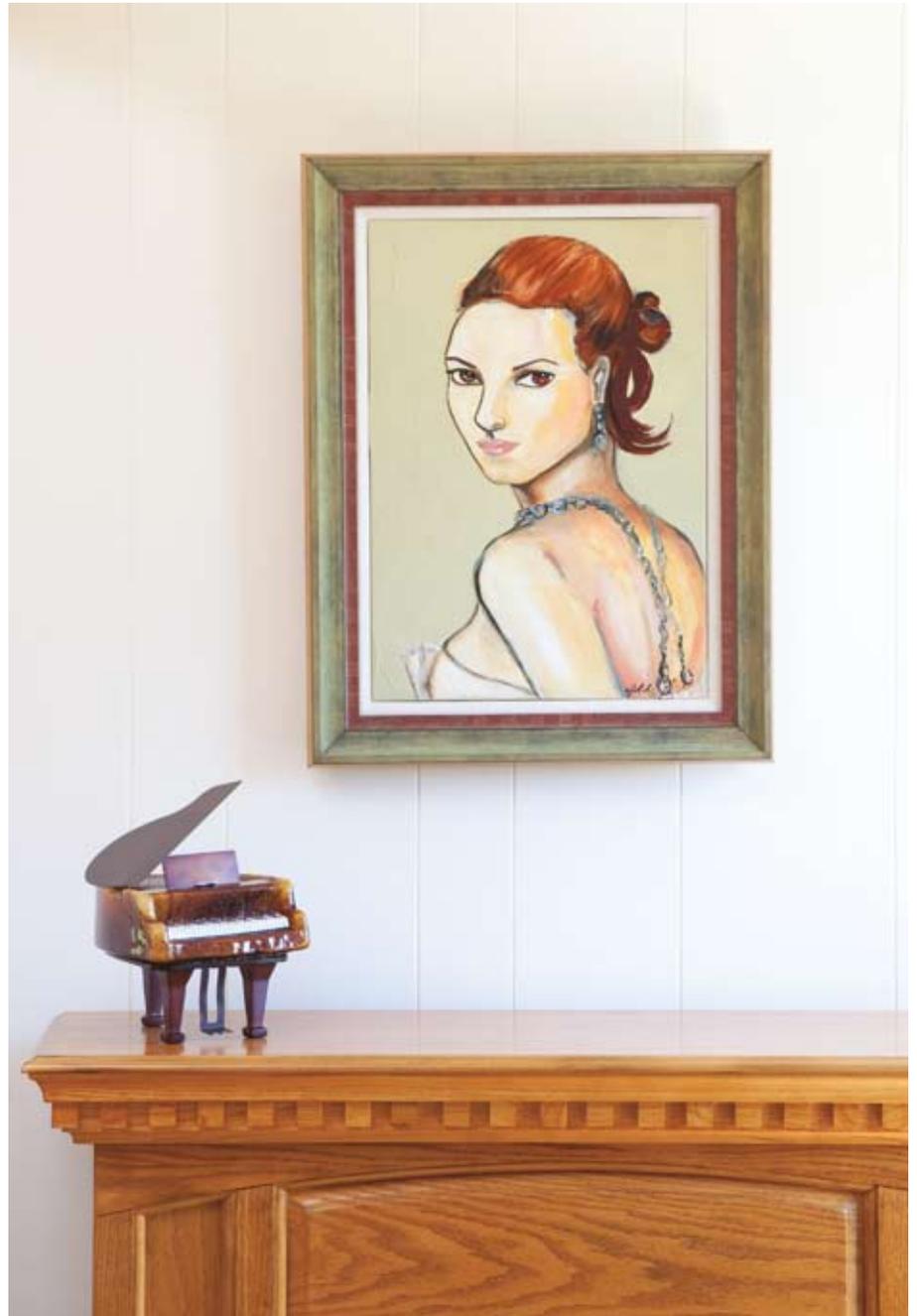


As seen in the dining room, Patssi Valdez's *Little Girl with Yellow Dress*, an acrylic on canvas. The table and chairs were commissioned by Cheech Marin.

Many of us know the comedian Cheech Marin from his roles in the *Cheech and Chong* movies. Few of us, however, have had the privilege to talk one on one with this extraordinarily erudite collector. Cheech's private collection of Chicano art is the foremost collection in the country and the world's largest. Chicano art celebrates its own traditions, but just as importantly is part of the

fabric of our national artistic heritage. I confess to having known little about Chicano art and culture until I spoke with Cheech and was captivated immediately. I dove into research on the subject as much for this interview as for my edification. The works that I studied are crisply delineated images of cultural references imbued with a distinctly Chicano flavor and point of view. Chicano art first surfaced in

the late 1960s and early 1970s when a group of Chicano independence activists began a political movement to have *Aztlan* (the lands of Northern Mexico annexed by the United States during the Mexican-American War) declared an independent nation—a Republica del Norte. Mexican American artists began chronicling this wave of activism and social justice, and this in turn led to the development



A Yolanda Gonzalez portrait of Cheech's wife, Natasha Marin, as seen in her piano studio.

of Chicano art. According to *Lowrider Arte*; "It was during this time that poster making and mural painting became powerful tools in helping to disseminate vital information about political activities to the masses. In essence, for Chicanos, it was the beginnings of integrating politics and art." The recent seven-year traveling exhibit *Chicano* toured museums across America and was sponsored by Target,

Chrysler and Cheech Marin. As Cheech said in his introduction to the exhibition; "I want all Americans to understand that Chicano culture plays a big part in the patchwork quilt that is Americana."

Eric Cohler: Cheech, would you say that your mission in collecting and exhibiting Chicano art is to educate people about this movement?

Cheech Marin: Absolutely. It's vital that the message behind Chicano art and the art itself is given greater exposure.

EC: I admit that I knew next to nothing about Chicano art until we spoke today.

CM: That's just it—mainstream museums traditionally have not collected or exhibited the work. Thus the broader public hasn't had



Looking from the guesthouse steps toward the Pacific Ocean.

an opportunity to learn about it, and more importantly to see the art.

EC: That's changing thanks to you.

CM: (Laughing) me and many others. It's all about education and exposure. That was the

genesis for the exhibition. We sent approximately 84 works around the country. The reaction was overwhelmingly positive.

EC: It really boggles my mind that so few museums have taken the plunge and not built

stronger collections.

CM: It's gathering momentum, though.

EC: How many of your own works were included on the tour?

CM: 65.



In the double-height master bedroom, a 1985 painting by Carlos Almaraz, *Boating Party*.

EC: Incredible. What did you hang on your walls while the collection was traveling?

CM: Lots more art. I have close to 350 paintings and rotate them from storage when I decide that I need to see a fresh face.

EC: I like that. Art can become too static. It needs to be moved around to be ‘seen’ and to give it dimension. Here’s what the *Los Angeles Times* said about the exhibition when it made its final stop at LACMA; “For Marin, who championed Chicano art as his

personal crusade, it’s not only a triumphal homecoming but a vindication for his campaign to place these artists squarely in the American mainstream.” These words hold such portent that they practically jump off the page.



Cheech and Natasha Marin in front of *Even Bats Have Mothers* by Carlos Almaraz.



Amid Cheech Marin's best-selling records, three paintings by Diane Gamboa.

CM: Seriously, I'm thrilled that the exhibition was such a hit...

EC: Now that we've basked in the limelight I'm going to toss you a few mundane questions... How did you get started collecting? Was it later in life or did you start at a young age?

CM: I began collecting marbles and matchbook covers as a child. Then when I was a bit older, but still quite young, I discovered art. I would spend hours and hours in the library studying and looking at art in books and magazines. It all crystallized for me when I went to my first museum—the LA County Museum and saw paintings in person.

EC: This validates my thesis that collectors are born, not made. And then...

CM: I started collecting Art Nouveau, Art Deco

furniture and decorative arts. This was in the early 1970s and Barbra Streisand and I were big game hunters of the day. Most people just weren't interested in the recent past.

EC: You were on the vanguard.

CM: Call it that or call it luck, but my real love was yet to come. I had been in Europe on tour. In Amsterdam I walked into the Rijksmuseum, turned into one of the galleries and there was Rembrandt's masterpiece, *Night Watch*. It was one of those seminal (ahhhhhh!) moments. I knew then that I wanted to collect more than Art Deco.

EC: This was in the 1980s?

CM: The early '80s. This is when I discovered Chicano art. And this was an even bigger thrill. I had always identified myself as a Chicano, as

well as an Angelino and finding an art form that celebrated this culture was an epiphany.

EC: How does a collector know when it's time to pull the trigger, to make that initial purchase as a foray into something new and untested?

CM: For me it's about buying with an eye of recognition of value. Here's the caveat though, buy the best piece that you possibly can. You won't regret this later on.

EC: That's very true. I've often made the mistake of buying something merely because it reminded me of something else or was affordable—i.e., cheap.

CM: We've all been down that road. Remember that it's also about education. Look, read and talk to artists and art dealers, collectors and museum curators.



By the living room hearth, *Portrait of Anna* by Yolanda Gonzalez.



Off the living room, *A Dios*, a sculpture by Einar and Jamez de la Torre.

EC: And in my case it has to also be about restraint (LOL).

CM: The wonderful thing about Chicano art is that it's still affordable. Prices start at under \$1,000.

EC: I'm tempted.

CM: You won't be sorry. It's one of the last great values in American art.

EC: Of course, for you, Chicano art is also a love affair and that's what makes your collection cohesive and unique.

CM: It's about passion.

EC: Speaking of passion, if you could have dinner with one artist living or dead who

would that be?

CM: Vermeer or Carlos Almaraz; who was the leading proponent of Chicano art. I regret never having met him.

EC: If you could add one fantasy painting to your collection?

CM: It would have to be a Caravaggio.

EC: What about your favorite museum? Where do you like to go most?

CM: The de Young in San Francisco and the National Gallery in D.C.

EC: Your taste is slipping.

CM: Wise guy!

EC: Hey—that would be you. Thanks, Cheech, this has been great fun. ●

Eric Cobler, president of Eric Cobler Inc., holds a master's degree in Historic Preservation from the Columbia School of Architecture. He won a Designer of the Year Award in 1998, and in 2000 the D&D Building in New York recognized him as one of the 26 leading designers in the U.S. Eric has appeared on CBS Morning and Evening News and CNN Style and he is a featured designer on the Home & Garden TV Network.

