



Left to right, top to bottom: Ayn, Nancy, and Ellen Grinstein with Robert Rauschenberg;
Elyse Grinstein with Jasper Johns; Elyse Grinstein with Ken Price; party for Robert
Rauschenberg with friends and artists, including Frank Gehry and wife Berta, Chuck Arnoldi,
Laddie John Dill, and more; Nancy and Ellen Grinstein with sumo wrestler and friend Tracy
Albert in background; Stanley Grinstein and Robert Rauschenberg by the pool for breakfast.

Generous Collectors

How the Grinsteins Supported Artists

“Before he died, Picasso designed a KFC in Koreatown.”¹ This was tweeted in reference to the po-mo Kentucky Fried Chicken on Western Avenue and Oakwood, just blocks from my home. Elyse Grinstein and her architecture partner Jeffrey Daniels envisioned the building in the late 1980s, when a franchisee wanted to take a risk. *Curbed L.A.* later nominated the “funked out bendy-tower shaped building” (a description by a Yelp reviewer) for its Ugly Building Contest in 2007, citing its “strange clown” qualities.² The KFC features a bucket-shaped exterior (though one journalist compared its shape to an abstracted chicken), and a dumbwaiter that brings food from the bottom floor up to the top, where most patrons sit. Perhaps it has been so misunderstood because it was designed by someone whose tastes had graduated well beyond Picasso, and whose cultural proclivities had never been conventional.

Elyse Grinstein liked Robert Rauschenberg, Barbara T. Smith, Ken Price, James Lee Byars, and Alexis Smith, and she prized a sense of community. “If people gather in fast-food joints,” she asked an *L.A. Times* reporter in 1994, 22 years before her death at age 87, “why can’t a chicken shack be a community center?” (Her chicken shack, despite its many critics, is friendly, with seating on indoor and outdoor balconies.) Said that same *L.A. Times* reporter, “she doesn’t want to build monuments, nor does she think she can change the world.” She just wanted to help “people feel as if they belong to a place.”³

Before Grinstein’s late career in architecture—which she began in 1978, at age 48—a different building defined

her. She and Stanley Grinstein, her husband from 1952 until his 2014 death and the proprietor of a forklift business, bought their home on Rockingham Avenue in Brentwood in 1965. By that time, they had three daughters in tow, and owned one modest work by Josef Albers. But it was the Rockingham house that enabled the kind of patronage that distinguished them: hosting parties, introducing East Coast artists to West Coast artists, or housing itinerant or out-of-town artists for days, weeks, and sometimes months. “My dad and mom always said without this house they wouldn’t have had this life,” their daughter, Ellen Grinstein, told me.⁴ The artist Laddie John Dill, remembering how often the Grinsteins hosted artists, asked me earlier this year, “Who is doing that for the art world now?”⁵

The short answer is no one. No collector on *ARTnews*’ top 200 collectors list, a list that never included the Grinsteins, supports artists in a quite so open and egalitarian way. “A flophouse,” is what the Grinsteins’ eldest daughter, Ayn, jokingly called the home in a 2016 *W Magazine* article, referencing the way artists came and stayed as they pleased.⁶

Collector Chara Schreyer likes to meet artists, but that comes later, after she has decided to support a particular artist’s work. Cliff Einstein has said repeatedly “never meet the artist before you meet the work,” and offloaded certain works in his collection when he and his wife Mandy wanted to become more serious about collecting. The Grinsteins only ever sold one work, a sculpture by George Rickey, to finance a family vacation after their daughters confronted them about caring more about art and artists than their own children.

Though it was used often to describe the Grinsteins, the term “generosity” is a complicated one in relation to art collecting. *The Observer* noted in a 2015 editorial that reliance “on the generosity” of donors and trustees often leads museums to exhibit work that donors like or already own.⁷ *Business Insider* used it to describe CEO

Catherine Wagley

1. Quoted in Laurie Galerreta, “In Defense of Koreatown’s Weird, Wacky Misunderstood KFC,” *LAist*, February 21, 2019.

2. J. Williams, “Ugly Building Contest,” *Curbed L.A.*, April 17, 2007.

Leon Black's "generosity" to MoMA, shortly before he lent the museum a version of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, which Black bought for \$119 million and still privately owns.⁸ But more often, the term is used for collectors of lesser means: Herb and Dorothy Vogel, who shared a one bedroom New York apartment with small Sol Lewitts and Lawrence Weiners; or playwright Edward Albee, who used proceeds from the success of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* to start a grant-giving foundation.

The Grinsteins did have means, but their collecting began before they could afford to buy pieces outright (Stanley's business was in early stages), and their approach was much more bottom up than top down. They supported the *making* of the artwork: in addition to housing artists while they made work, Stanley Grinstein opened charge accounts for artists at Anawalt Lumber, Bel-Air Camera, and FLAX Art Supply, where they could charge their supply purchases to him.

They weren't alone at the time; certain other collectors made supporting artists and the local art world their vocation, too. Diana Zlotnick, who also collected, was similarly unprecious about her artwork—while Elyse Grinstein used Andy Warhol's soup can editions as doors for her kitchen cabinets, Zlotnick hung Wallace Berman pieces exposed in the stairwell of her Studio City split level. She also wrote an art newsletter from 1970 into the 2000s that posted artist classifieds (objects for sale, jobs needed), show announcements, and rebuttals to *L.A. Times* reviews with which Zlotnick disagreed. Eugenia Butler, who ran an experimental gallery for three years on La Cienega, also invited artists from the East Coast or overseas to stay with her for extended periods, and would host big gatherings in her Hancock Park home. By the later 1970s, however, Butler had divorced her husband and begun to see herself as an artist, and no longer collected and hosted in the same way. The Grinsteins, in contrast, continued, though their collecting slowed

somewhat after Elyse became an architect in the 1980s, just as certain artists they knew well began to command exponentially higher prices. "I believe the global art market is appalling," said Elyse in a 2009 oral history about L.A. "It becomes a commodity; it's no longer a work of art."⁹ While the Grinsteins aren't an extinct breed—for instance, collector Juliet McIver supports the making of new work, and loaned money to a young gallerist—the model seems increasingly antiquated as the art fair and auction house circuit continue to promote collecting as an asset-driven sport. At the same time, their model is still attainable for collectors interested in the not-yet-established, and all the more attractive as investment collecting increasingly encourages homogeneity at blue chip levels (the priciest art all polished in the same kind of way).

The Grinsteins acquired the Rockingham house almost accidentally. The house was on the market for beyond what they could afford in 1965 and, according to their daughters, Elyse told Stanley she just wanted to practice bidding. They bid dramatically low, and the owner, a recent divorcee eager to leave, promptly accepted. They could barely afford their own low bid, but they went ahead with it. The house has a maze-like assortment of rooms, a bedroom with its own sitting room, and a kidney-shaped, tiled swimming pool in its pleasant backyard. "We felt very self-conscious because it was so big," Elyse told *W Magazine* in 2016. "We brought in a jukebox and invited everybody we knew to funk it down so it didn't seem so grand and pretentious. That was the start of the parties."¹⁰

Elyse and Stanley Grinstein met at USC—Elyse had lived in California most of her life, and Stanley had transferred from the University of Washington when his father moved to Los Angeles to start a scrap metal business. In the mid-1950s, they began taking extended learning courses at USC and UCLA, because, according to Ayn Grinstein, "They were looking for something they could do together."¹¹ They took an art course with a young Walter Hopps,

3. Aaron Betsky, "Stylemaker: Not the Retiring Type," *Los Angeles Times*, July 31, 1994.

4. Ellen Grinstein, interview with the author, July 5, 2019.

5. Laddie John Dill, interview with the author, March 20, 2019.

6. Susan Morgan, "Opening the Doors of Gemini, a Family Home Brimming with Historic Art," *W Magazine*, Oct. 12, 2016.

shortly before he co-founded Ferus Gallery. They started collecting by buying a Josef Albers painting from Hopps' business partner, Irving Blum, on \$10 per week installments.

They met artist Larry Bell early on because their class visited his studio, and when they bought the Rockingham house, Stanley asked Bell to invite his friends to their first art party. The Grinsteins invited some of their friends too—"straight people," as Stanley called non-artists. That first party went poorly. "The artists didn't want to interact with the straight people," Stanley recalled in a 2012 interview. "[The artists] were here because Larry asked them to be here. But [...] they'd rather be at Barney's Beanery or something."¹² From then on, the Grinsteins would only invite one or two "straight couples" to their parties, often Jim and Eugenia Butler, who shared their taste for adventure and lack of pretention. "We'd have music in that room, we'd have a juke box. We had food, salami and cheese, and not much else, some dip maybe, in this room, and then you could talk in this other room," said Stanley. "So it's a place for everyone. Artists didn't need new friends, and they didn't need us to show them off to our friends."¹³

Sometimes though, artists did need forklifts, and, early on, Elyse would use the forklift business to barter for things she wanted. Circa 1965, she wanted some works framed, and asked the framing company Art Services if they needed a forklift. They said they did not but that she should ask Ken Tyler, a master printer working under the company name Gemini but struggling to get his business off the ground. Elyse thought Gemini had promise, and introduced Tyler to Stanley and his fraternity brother, Sidney Felsen. With Tyler as their talent, the two families developed a business model. Gemini G.E.L., a fine art printmaking studio that still partners with artists to make limited editioned prints, worked with Josef Albers, Richard Serra, and Robert Rauschenberg early on. The business operated more exclusively than the Grinsteins' own collecting and

patronage. While the couple made no qualms about keeping works they liked that had no monetary value—like the pendulum Elyse found at a swap meet, which swings across from an Ellsworth Kelly inside the main, high-ceilinged living room—Gemini only worked with artists of a certain, proven caliber. As it could take years to complete an edition, they invited artists they believed could sell enough for them to break even. ("But the artists never cared if they were asked to Gemini or not," said Ellen Grinstein, before her sister Ayn countered that "Some of them probably did.") Replied Ellen, "But it never made them feel any different about our parents."¹⁴

Gemini is perhaps better known than the Grinsteins, in part because they did not advertise their involvement and the print shop's name wasn't their own. Their name is not on any building in the city either, unlike the Broads, who started out similarly, buying at low price points. Elyse and Edye Broad used to visit La Cienega galleries together early on, but by the late 1980s, Edye's role faded into the background as Eli Broad took the art patronage spotlight.

The late Morley Safer of *60 Minutes* interviewed Eli Broad a few years back, asking about a sculpture called *Zombie* (2008), made of newspaper and wheat paste:

Broad: Well, it's Tom Friedman—who's quite an accomplished artist, I'm told.

Safer: I'm told?

Broad: You know, some of these artists, I've gotta learn more about.

Critic Rhonda Lieberman, who quoted this Safer-Broad exchange in her 2014 takedown of the billionaire collecting class, described Broad as "[w]ielding the purse-power to make or break careers."¹⁵ Neither Stanley nor Elyse would have struggled to describe an artwork in their collection, or an artwork not in their collection for that matter, as they were as much interested in artist's ideas as they were the art.

One morning in 2012, artists gathered at the Grinsteins' house so

7. The editors, "Smart Money in Art," *The Observer*, March 25, 2015, <https://observer.com/2015/03/the-smart-money-in-art/>.

8. Kayta Wachtel, "Meet Wall Streets 25 Most Serious Art Collectors," *Business Insider*, Feb. 7, 2011, <https://www.businessinsider.com/wall-street-art-collectors#leon-black-24>.

their daughter Ellen could record an oral history. In footage from that day, artist Jim Ganzer skeptically recalls a performance by another artist, Paul Cotton, describing seeing Cotton “in a rabbit suit with his dick hanging out” accompanying Eugenia Butler to a LACMA opening in the early 1970s. Stanley, sitting in the breakfast nook and wearing a housecoat, pipes in to explain that Cotton’s life and art were indistinguishable, and the rabbit suit with a genitalia-exposing hole in it “was his costume.” Says Stanley, “He did it at documenta too [...]. Paul was a pretty good artist, an interesting artist.” Ganzer discloses, “I just was embarrassed to see the whole thing,” to which Stanley knowingly replies, “You weren’t ready for it.”¹⁶

At Stanley’s memorial in 2014, Ed Ruscha described the environment The Grinsteins created in their home as “unstructured merriment.” A 2016 print by Ruscha, with those words floating over a photo of the Rockingham house, now hangs in the back sun room. “Sometimes [things] got out of hand,” Ruscha continued. “But it didn’t seem to matter. We were the zoo and they were the zookeepers.”¹⁷

The Grinstein’s home is not like collector’s residences built to look and function as museums (of which there are a number in this city, including the Einsteins’ or Michael Ovitz’s homes). It needs people to activate it. Before he died, Stanley told his daughters he knew they would sell the house, but he asked them to throw one last party before they do. “I don’t want it to be about me and mom,” Ellen recalls him saying. “This house was too important to too many people. It has to be about the house.”¹⁸

Catherine Wagley writes about art and visual culture in Los Angeles.

9. Richard Hertz, *The Beat and the Buzz* (Los Angeles: Minneola Press, 2009).

10. Morgan.

11. Ibid.

12. Stanley Grinstein, video interview with Corazon del Sol, 2012.

13. Ibid.

14. Ayn and Ellen Grinstein, interview with the author, July 5, 2019.

15. Rhonda Lieberman, “Hoard D’Oeuvres,” *The Baffler*, January 2014.

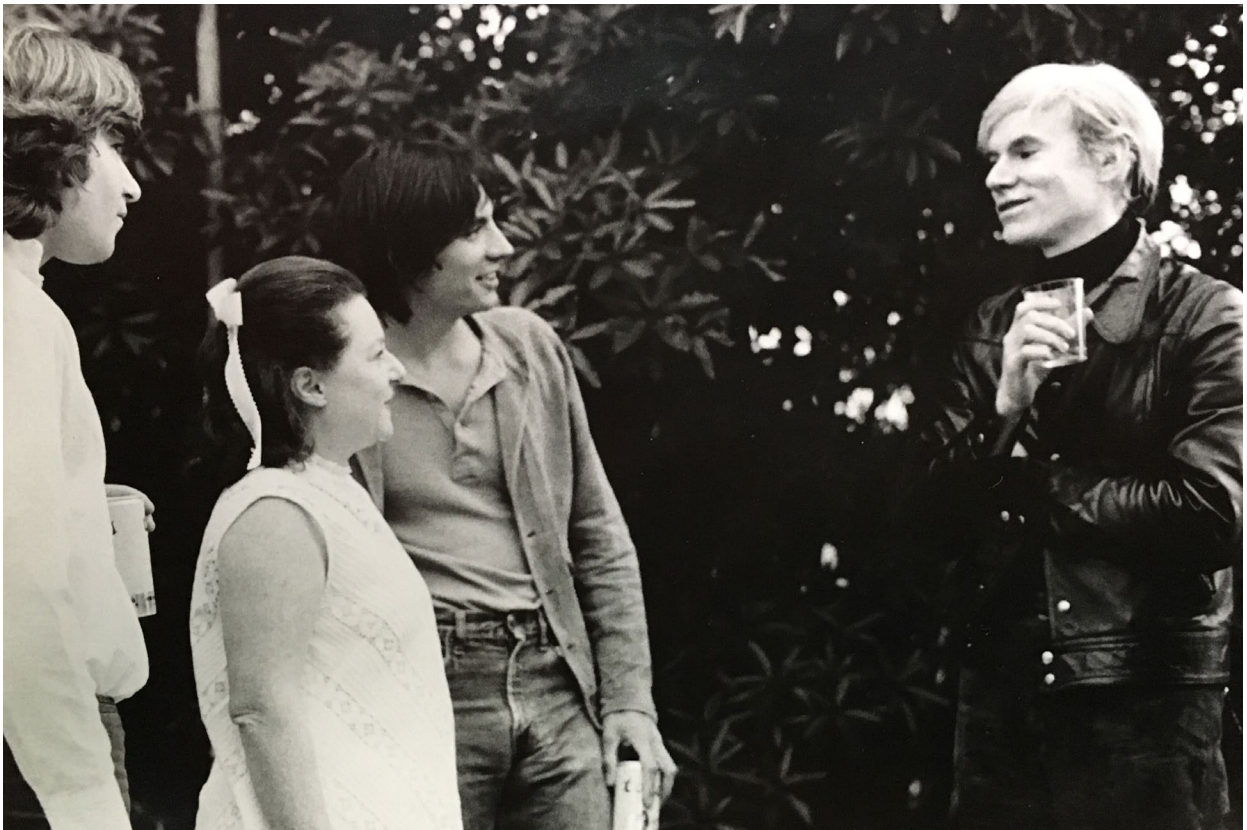
16. Del Sol.

17. Quoted in Donna Granata, “Gemini G.E.L.: 50 Years and Counting,” *Ampersand LA*, Oct. 2016, <http://www.ampersandla.com/gemini-gel-50-years-and-counting/>.

18. Ellen Grinstein, interview with the author, July 5, 2019.



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Above: Elyse Grinstein with David Hockney.

Below: Elyse Grinstein with Chuck Arnoldi,
Laddie John Dill, and Andy Warhol.

Corrections

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1. An earlier version of this article included the street address of the Rockingham house. We have removed it at the request of the family out of respect for their privacy.

2. An earlier version of this article stated that artists could charge their supply purchases to Stanley Grinstein, and rarely abused the privilege. This text was based on a conversation the writer had with the interviewee(s) that the interviewee(s) later clarified. In fact, it was the Grinstein daughters, and not the artists, who occasionally misused the expense accounts.

3. An earlier version of this essay was unclear on Sidney's involvement in the foundation of Gemini G.E.L. Stanley Grinstein and Sidney Felsen started Gemini, and it was later run by both families.

4. This essay has been updated to further clarify that it was the writer, and not the interviewee(s), who named the Einsteins and the Ovitzes in discussing the collector's homes.

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