

Neiman Marcus' new Dallas-Fort Worth store shows off support of local artists

By Kendall Morgan



The vividly colored Jubilation II by local artist Charlotte Smith brightens the menswear area.
Photo by Laura McCarthy.

Known as the place where cows meet culture, Fort Worth's reputation as a center of the arts extends all the way to the city's latest shopping destination. Debuting last month in the Shops at Clearfork retail complex, the newest outpost of Dallas-based Neiman Marcus is no doubt a must-see for designer fashion fans, but it should also be on the map for anyone interested in viewing a stellar collection of contemporary artworks.

Pairing high art with high fashion has always been a Neiman Marcus tradition, beginning with store co-founder Herbert Marcus.

"Herbert Marcus understood that 'air' was of vital importance in a store, and that the customer needed a place to rest their eye when looking at fine merchandise," explains Chris Lebamoff, Neiman Marcus' vice president of store planning and design. "He introduced art in the stores as an opportunity to give the eye a beautiful place to rest. Stanley Marcus began the Corporate Art Collection in the early 1950s, and it has grown to approximately 2,500 pieces."

Stanley Marcus' 1951 purchase of Mariposa, a large-scale Alexander Calder mobile, gave the Neiman Marcus Art Collection an instant gravitas. Over the years, works by Josef Albers, Richard Avedon, Roy Lichtenstein, Pablo Picasso, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, and Frank Stella have adorned everything from the dressing rooms to the shoe salon. But perhaps the most important part of the company-wide collection is the emphasis on local talent.

In the Clearfork store, contemporary, nonrepresentational pieces by artists residing in the Dallas/Fort Worth area are shown alongside classics handpicked by Stanley Marcus that were moved over from the city's prior Ridgmar Mall location. The collection, including works from Carol Benson, Matt Clark and Jackson Echols, Marcelyn McNeil, John Holt Smith, and Charlotte Smith, was curated by the store's planning and design teams with an eye to show the company's dedication to supporting the local arts community.

Dallas-based Charlotte Smith, who is repped by Dallas Design District gallerist Cris Worley, first had a canvas acquired by Neiman's in 2005, for the Houston Galleria store, leading to a long and fruitful partnership.

"They've bought stuff for just about every new store they've opened [since then]," says Smith, whose vibrant, layered paintings have a candy-like appeal that has inspired some pint-size Neiman's customers to try and lick the art.

"They approached me last summer about contributing work [to Clearfork], and I was so flattered. The cool thing for me is my mother was raised on a cotton farm in

Texas, and when she was growing up, going to Neiman Marcus was such a huge deal. So, when they started collecting my work it was very special, and something I wish she'd been alive to see.”

Repped by William Campbell Contemporary Art, Fort Worth-based painter John Holt Smith has had over a decade-long association with the store. Originally commissioned to do a piece for the Austin outpost, he's since created everything from a 2006 gemstone-inspired cover for the Christmas book to the current abstract canvases at Clearfork. Those pieces, influenced by Texas wildflowers and swimmers, can be found right at the top of the new store's escalator, in the menswear section.

“Over the years, Neiman's has taken [collecting] to a different level, and I wish everybody did that,” says Holt Smith. “You'll see some cities adopt a one percent for the arts policy, where they make sure for every new building there's a substantial amount of art that goes into the space for future dialogue, and to support the artist. It's a fact of history that art affects design and architecture on the whole, and Stanley Marcus seems to have understood that symbiotic relationship.”

The truth is, the eye has to travel and, like Herbert Marcus realized all those years ago, having something beautiful and complementary to view in the midst of a bustling shopping experience benefits both retailer and customer alike.

Says Holt Smith, “Art pulls you out of yourself and sets you up to see things as fresh and new. It's strange more people don't use that side benefit of what art can accomplish.”