

## SHOW US YOUR WALL

# A Collection That Owes Its Existence to a 'Carpe Diem' Event

Ellen Marmur's skin cancer reset her course. For more than a decade she's been on a quest to add beauty to her surroundings.

By Shivani Vora

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The dermatologist Ellen Marmur says she has always appreciated a striking painting or photograph, but she only began collecting art seriously after she learned she had skin cancer in 2006.

"When I got cancer, my philosophy became very much about 'carpe diem' and living my best life now," she said. "Part of that life means collecting beautiful art because art gives me such joy."

Dr. Marmur, who recently had a recurrence of aggressive but not life-threatening basal-cell cancer, has gathered a sizable collection of contemporary paintings and photography by American artists. Many live in or around New York, including Tara Donovan, a sculptor from Brooklyn who likes to use disposable items like toothpicks and straws in her work; April Gornik, known for her landscape paintings, who resides in Sag Harbor; and another Long Island resident, Zu Sheng Yu, a Chinese artist who focuses on oil paintings and sculptures.

Dr. Marmur, 50, lives in a light-flooded, white-walled Upper East Side apartment looking out on the East River with her husband, Jonathan Marmur, 60, the chief of cardiology at SUNY Downstate Medical Center, their children: Jonah, 22; Julien, 15; Sasha, 14; and Ezra, 12.

These are edited excerpts from the conversation.

## What kind of art are you attracted to?

I like the story behind the work and look at each of my pieces as a novel. My father was a Shakespeare professor, and understanding humanity through literature is how I grew up.

In Dr. Marmur's living room, Chuck Close's "Self Portrait" (2009). Kivvi Rachelle Roberts for The New York Times

## Do you have a favorite work?

The piece by James Turrell called "Aten Reign" blows my mind. He did a light installation at the Guggenheim in 2013 that was also called "Aten Reign." You were supposed to lie down in the lobby and look up. It was like being transported into the galaxy. This is an image of the inside of the museum and looks like a sphere.

The oil painting in the kitchen by Zu Sheng Yu is another favorite. It's of white birch trees against a yellow background. It reminds me of when I was a canoe wilderness guide in Minnesota in college. The barks of the trees have what look to me like eyes. They personify the tree. I ended up buying more of his pieces, including one of pears.

**You own several works by female artists. Can you talk about your favorite piece by a woman?**

Probably the one by Tara Donovan in the foyer. She transforms everyday items into art. With this piece, she has stuck pins in cardboard and painted the tops black. They look abstract and could be flowers or movement or anything you want them to be. Everyone who looks at it sees something different. It's simple yet complex and really freeing.

An untitled 1988 watercolor by an unknown artist from a street festival in Israel. Kivvi  
Rachelle Roberts for The New York Times

Susan Paulsen's "Katonah" (2016). Kivvi Rachelle Roberts for The New York Times

**Where do you usually buy your art?**

I either go directly to the artists or to galleries I have a relationship with, like Pace where I've got a lot of my works. I get nervous going into different galleries because they seem so formal sometimes.

**How involved is your husband in the art you buy?**

Jonathan loves art, but he would never buy it. He would rather buy a car, but I do consider art a collaborative purchase. I find what I love, set it aside and have him go see it. It makes me feel good when he likes what I do. I trust his taste.

**Tell me about the piece in your dining room with the six pears.**

I am obsessed with pears. They're very human to me — especially their skin — and supple and beautiful. These pears are a picture by Susan Paulsen and represent the six people in my family. One of the pears is red, so I always ask "Who is the red pear in our family?"

**What's the first piece of art you bought that's in your apartment now?**

The painting of colorful boats in my bedroom, which is the most meaningful work to me in that room. It's a watercolor on silk by an unknown artist, and I got it on a street in Jaffa 30 years ago on my first trip to Israel. I think I paid \$100 for it. It matters a lot to me because it's come with me through much of my life.