



Komal Shah, shown in her Atherton home with a painting by Elizabeth Murray, is an avid art collector.

Carlos Avila Gonzalez / The Chronicle

Art lover's calling is collecting

Philanthropist a strong advocate of diverse, challenging creations

By Charles Desmarais

Komal Shah's image has graced the pages of The Chronicle many times in connection with her philanthropic support of the Bay Area's major cultural institutions. Always dressed in sumptuous gowns, she projects the image of the New Bay Area: a successful immigrant bringing her wealth, charm and glamour to the region's center stage.

But that is only a very small part of who Shah is.

An engineer and a former manager at such major tech companies as Oracle, Netscape and Yahoo, the Atherton resident earned a master's degree from the Haas School of Business at UC Berkeley and a master's from Stanford. She now is on the board of trust-

Shah continues on E2

Art aficionado on a mission to collect

Shah from page E1

ees of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Tate Americas Foundation, among others.

A committed advocate of women's rights, she is, among other involvements, a founding board member for the Center for Equity, Gender and Leadership at the Haas School.

She and Gaurav Garg, her husband of 20 years, were named last year by ARTnews magazine as among the world's top 200 art collectors.

Shah, 49, was born and raised in Ahmedabad, India. "I came to the U.S. to Stanford about 27 years ago to study computer science and (remember) calling up my parents in six months and telling them that this was home now and that I wasn't coming back," she told *The Chronicle*. "I've lived within about 10 miles radius of Stanford ever since."

When her young son was diagnosed with an illness that required extensive occupational therapy, she left her job heading product management at Yahoo to care for him. It was around that time that she joined the board of the Asian Art Museum. She was not then an active art collector.

She says she loved "talking about Indian heritage and Indian art." Eventually, though, "I realized that culturally I connected more with artists of my age, mostly in North America."

Under the mentorship of Mark Godfrey, a curator at Britain's Tate Modern, and, later, SFMOMA senior curator Gary Garrels, "the 'collection bug' sort of hit me," she says. "I decided to start collecting first with (artists) in my generation and my age, and then it's sort of gone backwards and forwards."

The first major work of contemporary art she bought was by the artist Rina Banerjee, like



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Komal Shah sits near an art piece by Jacqueline Humphries in her home in Atherton. She and her husband, Gaurav Garg, also are funding a new art lecture series at Stanford University.

Artists on the Future: Dana Schutz in conversation with Hamza Walker: 6-7:30 p.m., Monday, March 4. Free; advance registration advised at <http://bit.ly/ArtguyDana>. CEMEX Auditorium, Stanford University, 655 Knight Way, Stanford.

The Komal Shah and Gaurav Garg Artist Conversation Series will continue in May with artist Lorna Simpson and Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation; and in October with artist Lynda Benglis and critic Kimberly Drew. More information at Stanford Arts. 650-736-4087. <https://arts.stanford.edu/office-of-the-vice-president-for-the-arts/artists-on-the-future>

Shah an Indian transplant.

"Her paintings are very beautiful," Shah said. "They are very sad and evocative of segregation and identity issues. And her titles are like long poems."

The purchase set her on a course to collect with a fine-honed point of view. "I need to focus my resources to where I can make an impact," she said. "I started collecting this core group of women ... Charline Von Heyl, Laura Owens, Jacqueline Humphries, Amy Sillman."

She fell in love with the work, first, she said. "But as I've started learning more about the gender disparity in the art world it has also become a focus to support these women."

Now, she said, "It is a very mission-driven collection. The art itself is very important and it's the central point of the collection. It gives me great joy. ... But it's also about correcting that 'scale of imbalance,' if you will, and supporting these artists so that they can also enjoy their place in the sun."

That's true for artists of color as well."

She talked spiritedly about her role as a collector on a museum board, and specifically SFMOMA's board. The museum and its curators help to shape her collection strategy, she said. But "on the other hand, I'm supporting the museum with funds and also advice. ... There are times where we see things earlier as collectors, or help them acquire works that are hard for them to acquire. And in some cases at SFMOMA, sort of adding a different voice."

"Our (personal collection) is unique across all of the trustees, in that it's only women, only artists of color. And that's sort of a new dimension to what the trustees have been collecting. And so I feel that it's one of my roles to at least talk more about it and to sort of focus it."

Shah is clearly proud of the

role she and her husband played in creating Stanford's new Komal Shah and Gaurav Garg Artist Conversation Series, with the support of vice president for the arts Harry Elam. It starts Monday, March 4. The first discussants are Hamza Walker, a prominent curator who runs the nonprofit contemporary art space LAX-ART in Los Angeles, and artist Dana Schutz.

Schutz is the artist whose painting of slain civil rights icon Emmett Till, which she titled "Open Casket," prompted vocal protest when it was shown at the Whitney Biennial exhibition in 2017. It is a fact not lost on Shah.

"The painting itself is very provocative," Shah acknowledges. "It does evoke that emotion of disgust and sorrow. And so she absolutely did her job as an artist, which is to move people."

"However, Dana has been painting since 2002. Her paintings have been around causing discomfort, whether it's, sort of, social angles or personal angles, and so she wasn't painting anything extraordinarily different."

"I sort of wonder that I'm embraced as a collector of black artists, but a white painter who wants to paint a predominantly black issue is not accepted. I say, I want to talk about representation. I want to talk about appropriation and whose right it is to tell what story, especially in an increasingly global world. And I thought that Stanford should be that place to have those provocative conversations and ... to be able to touch those stories in a very authentic way."

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