

EBONY G. PATTERSON

Zachary Small, Brooklyn Museum, Courting Pop-Culture Icons, Readies for Alicia Keys and Swizz Beatz, The New York Times, 5 January 2024



Portrait of Ebony G. Patterson, Photo by Frank Ishman.

Call it an embarrassment of riches: The musician Alicia Keys and her husband Kasseem Dean, the producer and D.J. known professionally as Swizz Beatz, have purchased such massive artworks that only a few could squeeze inside their homes in California, New York and New Jersey. Some colossal paintings by artists like Kehinde Wiley, Derrick Adams and Titus Kaphar eventually got through the door and became staples of the couple's daily routine — backdrops to movie nights and family parties.

"We have never seen all these artworks in one room," Keys said in a recent interview. That will change on Feb. 10 when monumental artworks from their collection star in a major exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum's Great Hall.

Called "Giants: Art from the Dean Collection of Swizz Beatz and Alicia Keys," the show, by dint of its location, endorses the couple as leading collectors of Black artists, though the obvious draw of their own star power cannot be denied. Keys is a Grammy Award-winning singer with a musical, "Hell's Kitchen," headed to Broadway this spring and Dean has produced hits with performers like Beyoncé, Jay-Z, Lil Wayne and DMX.

"There is great brand recognition with the Deans," said

Kimberli Gant, a curator of modern and contemporary art who helped organize the exhibition of more than 100 artworks and was involved in the museum's recent Spike Lee show. "People love Swizz Beatz and Alicia Keys, but they don't know them as collectors."

Dean started collecting as a teenager in the 1990s, when he bought an Ansel Adams photograph with proceeds from his first records with DMX. But the size and scale of his acquisitions of market favorites has grown since then. Five years ago, he estimated that there were about 400 pieces in his collection; now, he says, that number is in the thousands. Recent purchases include a 2018 Derrick Adams painting, "Floater 74," which will be on view at the exhibition. The 25-foot-long picture of Black figures relaxing in a pool used to hang in the couple's living room, creating a blue horizon dotted by inflatable flamingos and other pool toys above a dining area and sectional sofa.

"The reason why we doubled down on African American art is because people weren't collecting it," Dean said, explaining that it was difficult breaking into the market at first. The art world is built on relationships and few major auction houses or galleries catered to Black clientele.

"Things flow a little better now," Dean added, noting the increased diversity of artists exhibited at auctions

and fairs. “I definitely see changes being made, but we as collectors must take responsibility to shape the market.”

The rate of his acquisitions increased when he joined the Brooklyn Museum board in 2019 after the museum’s director, Anne Pasternak, recruited him.

“I watched as they developed a collection with real passion,” Pasternak recalled in an interview. “I used to go to galleries with them and see them at art fairs.”

The couple said they are preparing to donate several works from their collection to the museum but declined to name exactly which or how many works will become gifts, saying the list is being finalized. Pasternak said her personal favorites included a diptych by Amy Sherald, panel paintings by Meleko Mokgosi and photographs by Gordon Parks.

Planning for the Brooklyn Museum exhibition started in 2022; Dean resigned late last year from the museum board to avoid the appearance of any conflict. “It was the right thing to do because we wanted to keep focus on the show,” he said.

Nonprofit museums often rely on wealthy trustees to lend cash and clout to their institutions, but conflict-of-interest rules typically prevent those board members from financially benefiting from that relationship.

“As artists themselves, Alicia and Swizz are focused on showing the synergy between musicians and visual artists who are trying to make change in the world through forms of creative expression,” Gant, the curator, said.

Even frequent museumgoers would be surprised by the collection, Gant said, pointing to rare landscapes — 14 of them — by the portrait artist Barkley L. Hendricks and a tire sculpture by the video-maker Arthur Jafa. Other works — including a glittering installation by Ebony G. Patterson and four sexually charged scenes by Nina Chanel Abney — pop with color.

“I think that people are going to be very taken with what they see,” Keys said, adding that her mantra when collecting art has always been: “by the artists, for the artists, with the people.”