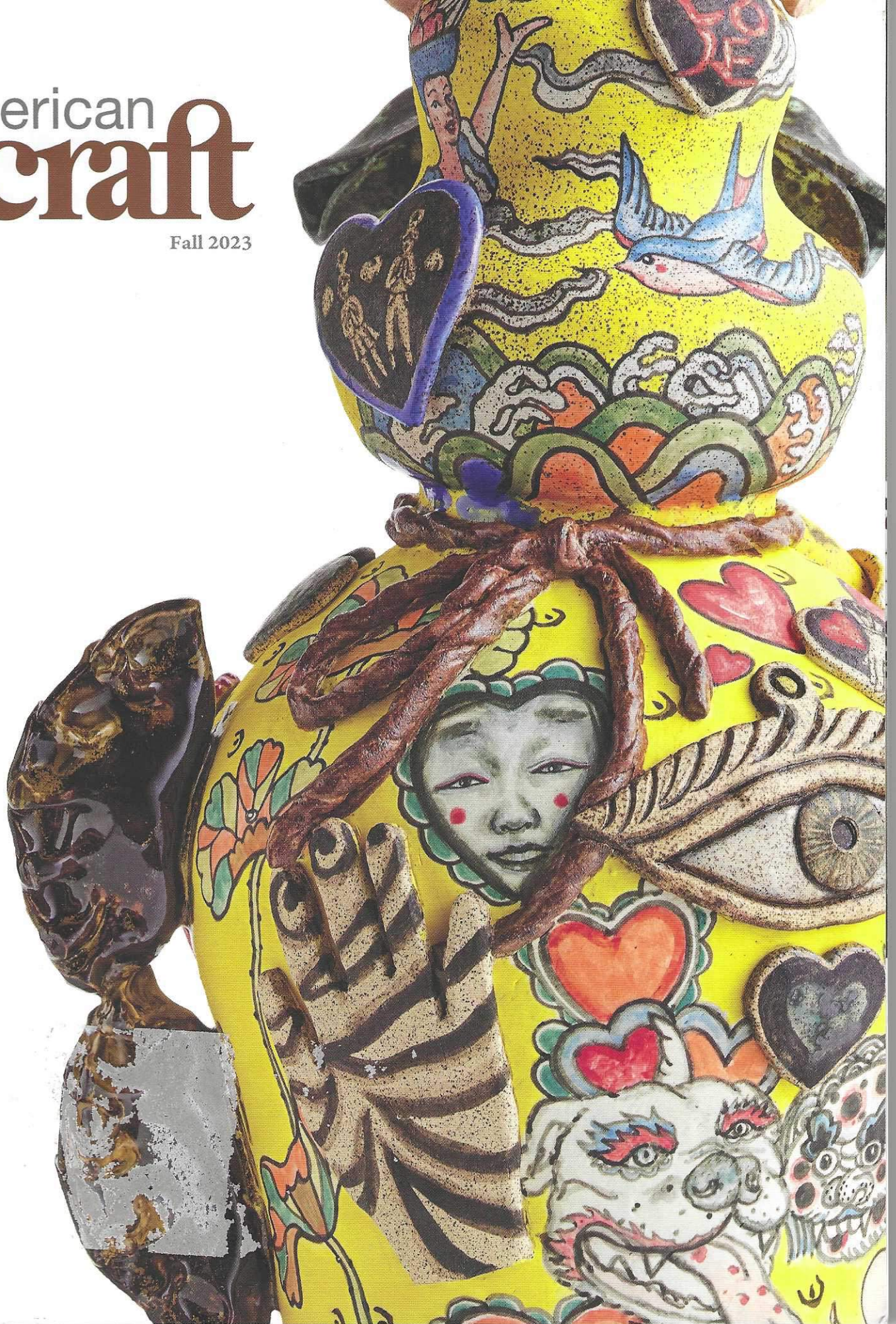


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## Come On In

*In Harlem, Claire Oliver Gallery seeks a more inclusive and equitable approach to cultivating collectors.*

**The Harlem-based dealer Claire Oliver** builds her business on moments of connection. “If, when I look at an artist’s work to show, I don’t immediately feel possessed to own everything I’m seeing, I don’t show the work,” she says. “There’s a visceral reaction that I have to the work that I show. I have to believe in it personally.”

The approach has proven to work well. Over more than three decades, Claire Oliver Gallery has built and sustained a reputation for championing historically under-represented artists, many of whom are today recognized as significant voices within American art history. The majority of names on its roster have always been of women, and the gallery has facilitated the acquisition of more than 300 works by Black and brown artists by major museums throughout the United States. These include the exuberant, intricate quilted portraits of Bisa Butler; the cut-paper and illuminated works of Barbara Earl Thomas; and the sewn and layered textiles of Gio Swaby that celebrate Black women. “The work, conceptually, has to be rigorous, and it has to have a message that’s important, that is going to elicit conversations,” Oliver says. “But then equally important is I want to see the hand of the artist on the craft.”

Amid an art market suddenly hungry for the kinds of artists the gallery has long represented, Oliver is also carefully considering where the gallery places work long-term. In 2020, after 17 years in New York’s Chelsea neighborhood—and before that, with chapters in Philadelphia and in Florida—the gallery relocated to a four-story brownstone in Harlem that Oliver purchased. The move to Oliver’s own neighborhood (she gets to walk to work now) has allowed her to focus on expanding her collector base with greater intention, especially toward equity and inclusion. It’s been her lifelong passion: the Southern California native’s childhood dream was to be chief curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but she grew to realize she wanted to engage directly with artists and promote their careers, rather than occupy herself with research.

That work today involves seeking out not only well-known art collectors but locals who are curious about starting their own collections. “We take great care that maybe a third of a show goes to people trying to establish a legacy for their children and their children’s children,” Oliver says. “We’re interested in that first-generation college grad who



ABOVE: Claire Oliver (left) with artist Simone Elizabeth Saunders, whose *Unearthing Unicorns* exhibition was held recently at Claire Oliver Gallery. OPPOSITE: In 2020 the gallery moved from Chelsea to Harlem (pictured).

has his first job and has a little money put aside, who lives here in Harlem and has bought his first house. That person will get equal priority, because we want to see more Black collectors getting a seat at the table.”

Many of those relationships get built through word of mouth, often referrals from museums the gallery works with and from collectors to whom it has previously sold art. But Oliver—who despite her veteran status says she often feels like an art-world outsider herself—also hopes to cultivate a space that is inviting, where a passerby may step in without feeling the intimidation often associated with contemporary art galleries, and discover work that excites them. “We don’t want anyone standing outside looking through the glass,” she says. “It’s very important, not just from the standpoint of creating new collectors. As a representative of some of the most powerful Black and brown voices speaking in the art world today, I need to have their work seen by their own community. So being in Harlem, to me, just rings true.”

She recalls seeing mothers and their children flock to Gio Swaby’s first solo exhibition in 2021, and seeing girls strike poses in front of the life-size, patterned portraits of Black women. There’s a strong sense of camaraderie—not only among her neighbors but also among other Harlem art spaces—that she never felt when in Chelsea, where business always trumped community. “People look out for and care about each other, and it’s just a nicer way to do business that, I think, rubs off on the collectors as well,” Oliver says. “We’ve lived here a long time, and we want to be able to create a legacy here.” —Claire Voon

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Photos courtesy of EC Living, Collins Gallery

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EXIT 2