

# CHARLES RIVA

FOUNDER OF THE CHARLES RIVA COLLECTION

BY KATY DONOGHUE, PORTRAIT BY STEVE BENISTY



**WHITEWALL:** Your mother was a painter. What kind of relationship did you have with art early on?

**CHARLES RIVA:** As far as I can remember I was surrounded by art. There were paintings kept everywhere in our house, even in the bathroom! In fact, the whole family was interested in art going as far as my great-grandmother. There were lots of artists coming to our house and many would also collect art as a passion.

**WW:** Your first "I love art" moment was when you were nine, seeing a Pop art collection at the Ludwig Museum.

**CR:** Like many kids, at that age I was reading a lot of comic books, and so when I saw that exhibition I felt like entering into that fantasy world. I was immediately attracted by the vibrant colors and the images. I still have memories of seeing Claes Oldenburg's massive ashtray, a Roy Lichtenstein painting about planes fighting in the sky, or the fantastic American nudes by Tom Wesselmann.

**WW:** What was the first artwork you purchased?

**CR:** Actually, it's funny I just mentioned Lichtenstein, because the first work of art I bought is *Brushstroke no. 5*, dated 1965. That print made

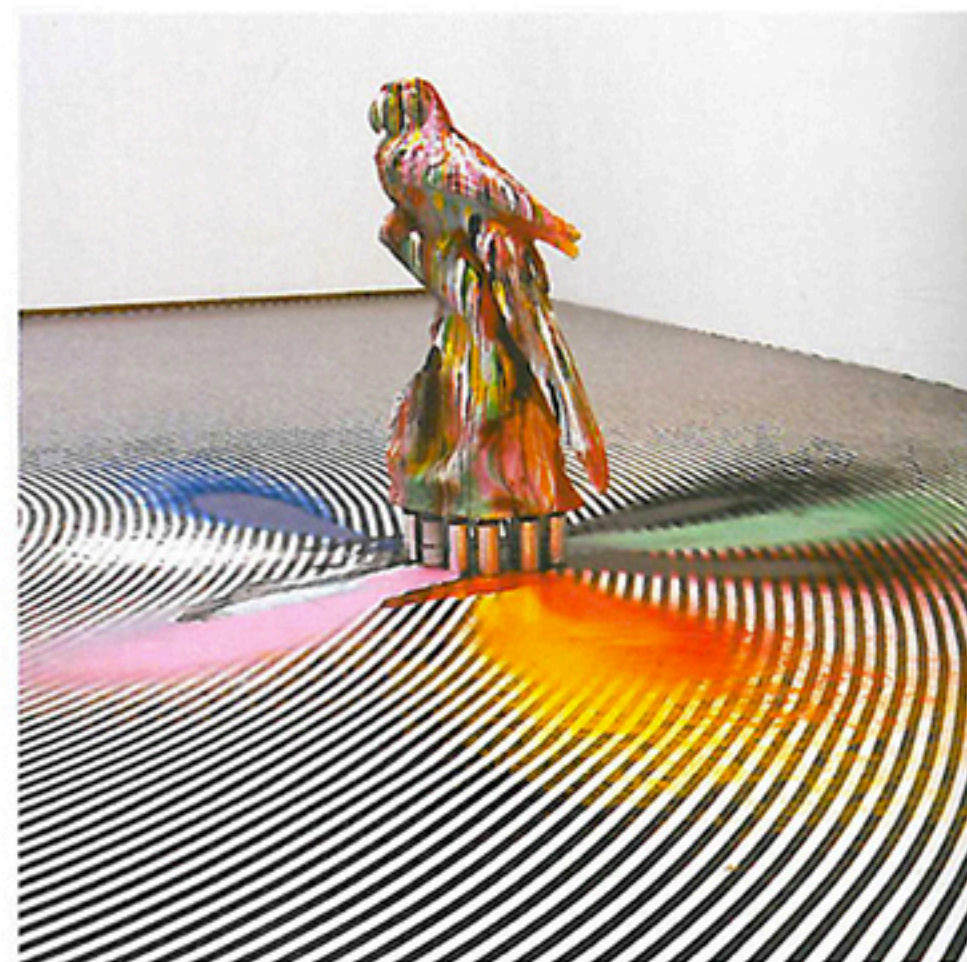
the cover of one of his catalogues.

**WW:** One of the artists whose work you collected early on was Paul McCarthy. What about his work interested you?

**CR:** The first McCarthy work I bought was made in collaboration with Mike Kelley. It's called *Heidi*. There he puts in question the education she received, being brought up alone in the mountains with her grandfather. Well, at first sight his work can seem to be mere provocation, but he is cleverly subverting the language and the icons of popular culture to tell a tale of his own. All the singular works add up to create this impressive and intricate world. It's like entering Disney World, except all the dark parts that were hidden to us are now made visible.

**WW:** At what point did you consider yourself a "collector"?

**CR:** To be a collector isn't just what you would call a hobby for me. My life revolves around it. I spend most of my time traveling around to see exhibitions, art fairs, or to the most significant auction sales. I realized that like the pieces of a puzzle, the works that I'm collecting are merging to form a bigger picture. I would start to have



Jim Lambie, *The Byrds*, 2006, mixed media.

more than a dozen works from each artist I collect, and it became impossible to show everything in my own apartment—that's when the idea of the collection came.

**WW:** Some collectors pride themselves on having never sold a work of art. Obviously, that's not for everyone, and you're open about selling works from your collection. Do you see an art collection as more of a living thing, changing and growing over time rather than just simply accumulating?

**CR:** Well, it's not just about accumulating. Selling artworks gives me the possibility to keep my collection in perpetual evolution and to share new works with the public.

**WW:** Why did you want to open up your collection to the public? What kinds of exhibitions did you want to put on?

**CR:** I think every collector has this dream of being able to live with his pieces, but at the same time to be able to share this special connection. By making exhibitions open for the public, they can discover works that are not often accessible. Through my selection I have the opportunity to show my own vision about art, what excites me. The collection has opened its doors with Jim Lambie's exhibition, then Paul McCarthy, Sterling Ruby, a collective show called "California" and a show of Levine that opened on November 8, 2013.

**WW:** You've had/have galleries in London, Paris, New York, and Brussels. How does the gallery dynamic compare to your collection's not-for-profit space?

**CR:** Well, I'm not participating anymore in art fairs. I don't have any more restrictions regarding that, so it makes it rather easier to make my exhibition more personal. Working as a gallery and having a personal collection makes things different. The format I'm using now is to make small retrospectives; rather than waiting for the artist to produce works, I collect the works that I'm interested in. It takes years to build up a collection suitable for an exhibition.