

# Joan Quinn Life in Art



One of the most important collaborations between art institutions has been taking place in Southern California. More than 60 museums and art venues are featuring exhibitions of postwar Southern California art in a project known as "Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945-1980." A parallel exhibition in Santa Ana entitled "Mysterious Objects: Portraits of Joan Quinn" presented a unique collection of works of more than two hundred Southern California artists. For many years, writer, editor, photographer and television host Joan Agajanian-Quinn has been the muse and inspiration for many artists. Her exotic appearance and vibrant personality became an illustration of how a single model could be reflected through countless works created in various mediums. For 35 years Joan and her husband Jack Quinn have supported artists. Their artwork-filled house is a famous hospitality spot where guests are always welcomed, and conversations spark action and creativity.

Text: Lianna Zakharian | Photo: Armen Poghosyan | Makeup: Klara Harutyunyan

## The Pacific Standard Time Initiative

The Getty Foundation has committed almost ten million dollars to reintroduce Los Angeles artists of the postwar period through the 1980s to the global arts community. Widely advertised in the United States and Europe, Pacific Standard Time should attract visitors to Southern California art museums and galleries, including the large exhibitions at the Getty Center, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Museum of Contemporary Art. Some of the collections will travel to Germany and other European countries. Joan and Jack Quinn have been invited to accompany the works they loaned to the Getty Center to an exhibition of the works in Germany. Some of the earlier pieces in their collection are works of the internationally known and influential Los Angeles artist, Billy Al Bengston, currently on display at the Getty. Other pieces from the Quinn collection include works from the acclaimed ceramists Dora De Larios, shown at the Gene Autry Museum and MOCA. If anyone would have an insider's view of the Los Angeles art community of the period, it would be Joan, defined by Robert Berman as a "contemporary Gertrude Stein" for her expertise, support of artists and love of portraiture.

## Youth and Family

Joan Agajanian was always in a limelight. Her father, the famous race car promoter J.C. Agajanian, and her uncle, the legendary football player Ben Agajanian, were objects of constant media attention. A Los Angeles native, Joan was born in View Park and was raised in the San Pedro area. Joan's childhood memories are often related to her extended family. Agajanian's mother had great taste and love of arts that she shared with her children. Joan and Jack Quinn have followed suit with their twin daughters, Amanda and Jennifer, taking them along in their travels, visiting the world's museums and blue chip galleries, and raising them in a house where artists were relatives, friends and frequent visitors. So recently, it was Amanda who convinced her mother to exhibit her



↑  
Huguette Caland,  
1991, oil on canvas,  
40x30 inches

←  
Eugene Jardin, 1991,  
epoxy resin sculpture,  
66x24 inches

There is something in Quinn's appearance that inspires the artistically minded. She resembles Gabriel Garcia Márquez's exotic characters, someone whose presence is announced by clouds of butterflies and blooming flowers.

portraits at a college, to demonstrate to the students how one object could be interpreted in different mediums. Amanda was the curator of the exhibit "Mysterious Objects: Portraits of Joan Quinn" and with J. Cheryl Bookout produced the exhibit's impressive catalogue.

Joan Agajanian's inclination towards journalism started early in her adolescence at the Westlake School for Girls, where she was a regular columnist in the school newspaper, and later at the University of Southern California, where she majored in Journalism and Education. While at USC, she worked at Desmond's department store. There she befriended the young artists, Billy Al Bengston and Dora De Larios, who

worked in the art department. Billy Al Bengston often visited her home and was interested in motorcycles, as was Joan's father, J.C. Agajanian. Joan knew Dora de Larios and some other artists from the time of their respective studies at USC, at that time one of the most important centers for the study of art ceramics in the world. "My Dad loved the artists and they loved my father. He liked to throw big parties and invite all the artists for dinner to mix with his other guests like lawyers, judges and friends in the sports field," recounted Joan. Joan married attorney John J. "Jack" Quinn, who graduated with a BS from USC and earned his JD at the USC law school. ▶





↑  
Craig Carlisle, 2005,  
graphite on paper,  
16x11 inches



→  
Ian Falconer, 1986,  
acrylic on canvas,  
24x18 inches



→  
Tadanori Yokoo, 1990,  
mixed-media, 38x28 inches

↑  
Ed Ruscha, 1997,  
acrylic, ink, on litho-  
graph, 7x5 inches

## Artists and Friends

After their marriage, Joan and Jack continued the family tradition of hospitality. In reference to a common question, Joan said, "Everyone asks how we managed to collect the works of such renowned artists. It's the group of people we were around; I think we were just lucky." Artist James Hayward recalled, "I have known Joan and Jack since the mid '60s. Back then there were two Los Angeles families legendary for their support of local artists: the Grinsteins and the Quinns. Parties at either of their houses were major art events attended by one and all. As society editor for the Los Angeles Examiner, she (Joan) was constantly putting photos of her artist pals alongside the political, musical and theatrical stars." Photographer Paul Ruscha describes Joan and Jack's house, "When I first went to a gathering at their place, I was quite surprised that there was so little space to move around in, because on either side of the beaten paths which meander through their many rooms, there were stacks and stacks of paintings, and tables and pedestals filled with sculpture. The walls of their Mediterranean villa could rival those of Prado Museum, except that they get to live in their galleries. That seems to have been their quest: to find as much Art as could possibly be admired and looked after in one lifetime..."

"One thing about Los Angeles is that there are no rules. You can do what you want. We are all friends with the artists; we are not competitive, we can think and talk about what we want, and nobody criticizes it." — Frank Gehry

A frequent visitor and family friend was the artist of Armenian descent John Altoon, an important character in the LA art scene of the 1950s and 1960s. His boisterous personality and enthusiasm energized everyone around him. Unfortunately, there was a manic-depressive side of him that led to hard drinking and resulted in Altoon's death at the age of 44 from a massive heart attack. "John Altoon was a very big and brisk Armenian guy. He was over at our house when my twins were just babies, and my cousins, Motse and Knare Mooshagian were catering a dinner. We were all mutual friends with artist Charles Garabedian, so when Altoon arrived, he went straight to the kitchen to supervise the cooking, to taste the pilaf and season the kebab. He was so excited to have Armenian food that he raved about it to the other guests, which included members of the Van de Kamp family, who owned bakeries and restaurants in L.A. and the surrounding areas. That was on Thursday night,

and he died on Saturday, very young. We were blessed to have him in our lives the little bit that we had him," remembered Joan.

David Hockney, one of the leaders of the Pop Art movement, became a good friend and a major influence in Joan's perception of art and philosophy. Born in England, he divided his time between London and Los Angeles from the 1960s through the early 2000s. "He is such a down to earth, good person — there is no pretense about anything he does. He is always thinking about art, always thinking about new ways to present things, he isn't afraid of technology or using it. And what I love about him is his spirituality," described Joan.

Jack and Joan Quinn developed a lifelong friendship with the revolutionary visionary of the 20th and 21st century architecture, the creator of famous buildings around the world, architect Frank Gehry. "I have gone to many many unveilings of his buildings.

## Dossier

Joan Agagianian Quinn, husband John J. Quinn and twin daughters Jennifer and Amanda have been supporters of the arts, particularly Southern California contemporary art for over 35 years. A Los Angeles native, Joan Quinn is the creator, writer, producer and host of *The Joan Quinn Profiles*, a series of over 400 complete shows. It is a 30-minute interview show in a two-guest format relating to the ins and the outs of the art world and the many facets of show-business. The cable TV show airs on a mini-syndicate from California to New York (1993-present).

The featured guests of the show include: Javier Bardem, Frank Gehry, Vera Wang, Giorgio Moroder, William H. Macy, Manolo Blahnik, Paul Morrissey, Charlie Hayden, Paloma Picasso, Zandra Rhodes, Oscar De La Renta, and many others. Joan has been seen on various TV shows, including appearances on: Fox News and KTLA (1989), CNN News (1993), E.R. (2000), *Hard Copy* (1995-97), *From Hollywood with Frank Swertlow* (1997). Having written and edited three, six-minute art segments for the show *Tributes* (1990-91) she followed her success with another TV show.

She created, produced, wrote and hosted "Joan Quinn, etc..." from 1990-92. Many of the notable artists that have painted or sculpted her portrait over the years include: David Hockney, Ian Falconer, Bob Graham, Robert Mapplethorpe, Antonio Lopez, Don Bachardy, George Hurrell, Magu, Joe Goode, Claire Falkenstein, Zandra Rhodes, Tony Berlant, Lucie Abdalian, Billy Al Bengston, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Larry Bell, Karine Matsakian, Ed Ruscha, Ed Moses, Laddie Dill, Kristin Calabrese, Andrew Logan, Duggie Fields, George Herms, Beatrice Wood, Elsa Flores, Mel Ramos, among many others.



↑  
Helmut Newton,  
1984, gelatin silver  
print, 11x14 inches

→  
Robert Mapplethorpe, 1986,  
silver print, 29x24 inches



→  
Robert Graham,  
1976, cast in bronze,  
7x4 inches



I went to Bilbao in Spain, as well as to Minnesota, just as a friend to show support. In fact, he is such a good friend, that when he was going out with his future wife, who is from South America, my husband said, "This is a wonderful woman, if you don't marry her, we're going to be very mad. In fact, when you marry her, we'll give you the party." So we gave them their wedding party upstairs at The Bistro, and all the artists came. David Hockney even came from London, and a lot of our English friends came with him. And... they're still married, thank goodness," Joan laughed and continued, "But he has been an influence, because he looks at things

in a different way, he skews your mind and makes you think about everything outside of the box, to be imaginative. And he has a great respect for artists, for anyone who is creative. You learn that respect from someone like him." I asked Joan to define the L.A. art community of 50s through 80s, and she responded, "They all had common values and strong work ethic, they all liked each other, no competition. The artists bounced ideas off each other, and we spent a lot of time socializing and spreading the word about their work. There was something else - many of them, whether they're painters or sculptors, used found objects. Take for

example, George Herms, a very good friend of ours - many of his works are included in the Pacific Standard Time exhibitions. He received the Grand Prix award while studying in 1982-83 at the American Academy in Rome, and he is one of the founders of the California assemblage school of sculpture. But those who don't understand might look at his work like he was just collecting junk and putting it together. Yet he had a story to tell through these found objects. He was putting them together into a piece of art, and they became a new story and had a new life. These were people that were real and weren't afraid to express and share what they were doing." ▶





← Andy Warhol and Joan Quinn with Richard Bernstein, The Factory, 1977



→ Andrew Logan, 2010, painted glass, mirror set into resin mounted on wood, 38x31 inches

← Joan Quinn and David Hockney, Malibu studio, 1989

↓ Sharon Weiner, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 12x12 inches

## Andy Warhol

Joan met Andy Warhol in New York and they instantly became friends. Both shared a great affinity for photography, collecting jewelry, and art. Andy and Joan would walk up and down Madison Avenue in New York looking in at all the stores. "I would see something, and he would go in and see it. And I would say that we don't like that, trying to talk him out of it, but in the meantime, he had already talked to the sales people telling them to put the item away for him. So we were very cunning, trying to buy the same thing," she remembered. For almost 10 years Joan Agagianian Quinn was the West Coast Editor of Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine. For Warhol, the magazine was a means of illustrating and publicizing his views. Joan enjoyed her work, and learned so much from Andy. His vision for a new type of interview was to have celebrities interview each other through informal and personal dialogue initiated by Andy himself. Agagianian's contribution was a success due to her good connections with the social and celebrity set in Los Angeles. Press agents of stars called and asked her to feature their clients. "We were more interested in young people, actors, and artists, and our goal was to give photographers a chance. Although we never paid very much, they got this great exposure and had an opportunity to meet Warhol." When Andy Warhol and his entourage visited L.A., Joan and Jack entertained them, introduced them to new artists, and connected Warhol with advertisers for *Interview* and patrons who wanted to commission portraits. "It was always fun when Andy and I were together, but when Andy died, it wasn't the same anymore, so I stepped away," she explained and continued trying to characterize Warhol.



← Duggie Fields, 1980, acrylic on canvas, 69x77 inches

"To me, there was nothing special about him," she began, "My husband used to say that Andy is a sponge. He just sits there and listens to what everybody is saying. Then he processes it, learns from it and uses it as his own. Sometimes, he was very quiet, but he also was very funny with that wig that he wore. Andy had a dozen of them in his bedroom. He always said nice things in public, but could dish on the best of them. He would ask something personal, but seemingly insignificant in his quiet voice. Pretty soon you would like him, and you would do all the talking, while he sat there listening to you. He would just know how to get information. He was a very strange phenomenon, because no one today has that mystique, which he built around himself," Joan said, contradicting herself, intentionally or not, but much in Warhol style. She, like Warhol, emanates a great deal of mystique according to her long-time friends. Billy Al Bengston wrote, "I've

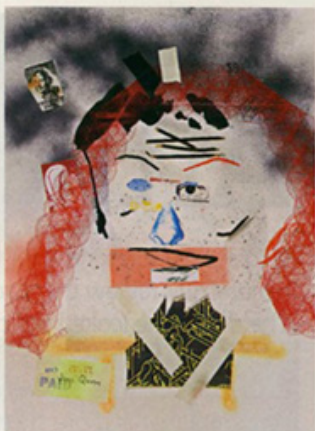
known Joan one year less than 60 years. And I still don't know anything about her." Recently Joan was on a trip to Pittsburgh, Warhol's home town, with her friend designer Zandra Rhodes who designed costumes for *The Pearl Fishers* at Pittsburgh Opera. There, Joan visited The Andy Warhol Museum. As soon as she walked in, several people came down to her saying, "We know who you are, your interview with Zandra is on the third floor." Genuinely surprised, she was led upstairs to see the issues of *Interview* and the time capsule left by Warhol that they had just opened. It was filled with photographs Joan had taken and a letter that she had written to Andy. The museum administration was just about to call and invite Joan, but coincidentally, she stepped in. "That was such a great experience. So you saw all these seeds all your life, and all of a sudden you see that it's working!" she shared with excitement.



↓  
Dora De Larios,  
early 1960s, ceramic,  
29x18x15 inches and  
29x16x15 inches



→  
Steve's House of Fine  
Art, Collaboration,  
1981, mixed media,  
24x18 inches



## Portraits

The first of Joan's portraits was a high school graduation gift from her mother painted by John Carr. When Andy Warhol started painting portraits he said, "You should have your portrait done." As the editor of *Interview* she had many connections. Soon Robert Graham, a good friend and Godfather of their twin daughters, sculpted her portrait and cast it in bronze, and from that point, "It just started rolling like a snowball. We would sit around and talk to each other about their work, then the subject of portraits came up, one would make a portrait, then others decided to do it too," she explained and continued, "Sometimes we would trade for the portraits with legal services Jack provided. Sometimes we would buy or commission the works outright – mostly from people that we did not know very well." The secret is that the artists and sculptors did and still do create her portraits willingly and enthusiastically. There is something in her appearance that inspires the artistically minded. To me, she resembles Gabriel Garcia Márquez's exotic characters, someone whose presence is announced by clouds of butterflies and blooming flowers. Perhaps it's because of her many pieces of fine jewelry, her red and pink hair, dark Armenian eyes and wide smile, or perhaps the quizzical turn of her head. Here is the way artist Gregory Wiley Edwards described his encounter with Joan, "I was immediately struck by the unique features of her countenance, although the pink and blue hair thing was... 'intense,' especially if you factored in with her... seven or eight watches, and yet somehow she was still calm and passionate. The overall impression... was

Once the collection grew, everyone wanted to be a part of it. For the artists, it became a matter of prestige to do Joan Quinn's portrait.

one of power, knowledge, 'intense' interest and mischievousness." Curiously enough, although the portraits in her collection vary in styles, genres, and mediums, each of them undeniably carries Joan's distinct features.

## Globetrotters

When I asked Joan whether she travels a lot, her answer was, "Not much." The new light in the life of Joan and Jack are their granddaughters, Jennifer's daughters, Paloma Lucine and Georgia Joan. And yet, in the matter of a month that the issue and this article were being made, I frequently contacted Joan, and each time she was either going or coming from some remote location. Last year, she traveled with Ed Ruscha to London to take a loaned Ruscha piece from her collection to the Hayward Gallery. Then Joan and Jack went to Munich with that same piece. "Both, the gallery and artists appreciate our support, first – because we have loaned our work and the artists – because they always have familiar faces when they are someplace far away." A month ago, Joan and Jack went with their good friend David Hockney to his retrospective at the Royal Academy in London. "I'm amazed at how she can be in Canada one day, in Cyprus the next, and in Chile the day after that, just to be in the thick of the most exciting events that the world offers," noted Paul Ruscha.

## Armenian Causes

One of Joan's most treasured memories was being the honorary commissioner for the Armenian pavilion at the Venice Biennale. When she visited Armenia in 1999, Zaven Sarkissian, Karine Matsakian, Samvel Sagatelian and Ara Hovsepian, each completed a portrait of her as a thank you gesture. Presently, Joan is actively involved in the Armenian International Women's Association (AIWA). During Marie Yovanovitch's visit to Los Angeles, the former U.S. Ambassador to Armenia discussed the issues of domestic violence that Armenian women are facing. As the AIWA NGO representative to the United Nations since 1997, Agajanian joined the Tufenkian Foundation, which was already taking steps to help women in need. "When they first started the shelter they provided legal help, counseling, and children's health services to the people of Karabakh. But then the women had to go back to their homes and abusive husbands. The women need a shelter where they could stay and feel safe, because without feeling safe, they could never make the break. That is also a big issue for the UN Commission on the Status of Women. Just awareness can lead to cultural change in society," said Quinn. "The way I look at things is to give, give, and give. I hate complaining and whining. You can't be negative. When you asked me how I keep going, it is because it's always exciting, it's always positive. Just get up and go!" ■