Carl & Marilynn Thoma
Spanning from Spanish Colonial painting to New Mexico modernism to 21st century digital artwork, the Thoma Collection is a national resource, and a Santa Fe highlight.

Just off the famed Canyon Road in Santa Fe sits an art exhibition venue called Art House—a fact that, in itself, is not unique. What makes this circumstance extraordinary, and what significantly differentiates the building from the other art spaces in town, is that within its historic, thick adobe walls are genre-breaking electronic and digital artworks by some of the most pioneering artists from the early 20th Century to today.

At any given time, the works on view represent a fraction of a larger collection of avant-garde art (600 works and counting) that reflects the vision of Carl and Marilynn Thoma. Since 2014, the couple has worked to distinguish their initiatives in, and support of, visual art through the Carl & Marilynn Thoma Art Foundation, a burgeoning organization that “recognizes the power of the arts to challenge and shift perceptions, spark creativity and connect people across cultures.”

Though the exhibitions are mounted at Art House in Santa Fe, the collection is stored at Orange Door, the Thomas’ art storage warehouse facility in Chicago, which is open by appointment for educational and private tours. A major goal of the Foundation and its staff is to demystify the language around art and collecting. Here, Foundation Curator Jason Fournberg utilizes the mini warehouse galleries as a testing ground for ideas and exhibitions, thinking visually and spatially, with the collection at his disposal.

As I speak with Carl from his Chicago office, he talks eagerly about his commitment to support artists working on the frontier of art and technology. "Technology has been used to creatively solve many issues, and art inspires problem-solving and ways to communicate with each other. I feel for the younger generation, one in which so much wealth has been created by information technology.” He further expresses how “new media” is underrepresented in Santa Fe and beyond—with only a handful of museums focused on collecting these works. "We are trying to be ahead of the trend, yet provide a way for people to understand this kind of work by exhibiting it in a traditional setting, and mixing it in with other styles such as hard-edge painting," he says.

Carl spent much of his childhood on his family’s cattle ranch on the Oklahoma-New Mexico border. Today he is not only an avid art collector, but the managing partner and founder of Thoma Bravo, LLC, a private equity investment firm. Marilynn started her professional career in brand management at the Quaker Oats Company in Chicago, and now handles the marketing of Van Duzer Vineyards, which she and Carl founded in 1998. "Fresh out of graduate school, shortly after Carl and I established a home in Chicago, an art dealer advised us to deepen our understanding of the artists that we favored...” says Marilynn. "Consequently, we grew more knowledgeable and confident in our ability to discriminate the great from the good."

OPPOSITE: "THE LAST JUDGMENT," LATE 17TH OR EARLY 18TH CENTURY
Unidentified Artist (Cuzco, Peru), oil on canvas, 96¼" x 76" 
Photo: courtesy Carl & Marilynn Thoma Art Foundation

BELOW: "MESOCOSM (WINK, TX)," 2012
Marina Zurkow, real-time generative program on computer and monitor, with sound
Photo: courtesy the artist and bitforms gallery, New York
Their collection has grown to be specific in its diversity, with three distinct areas of interest: Japanese Bamboo, comprised of baskets; Spanish Colonial, highlighting the “intertwined history of European and Andean cultures”; and Modern and Contemporary, focusing on Color Field, Op Art, Hard Edge, Light and Space, Digital and Electronic, and New Mexico Modernism. Works range from The Last Judgment, a 16th -17th Century unattributed large painting created near Cuzco to Spring Tide, a bamboo basket shaped to the point of breaking by Fujinuma Noboru; 1960s Victor Vasarely paintings to LED light works by Jim Campbell and fluorescent installations of Robert Irwin and Dan Flavin; landscape paintings by Raymond Johnson and Georgia O’Keeffe to computer-generated animation by Jennifer Steinkamp, to name just a few.

The exhibitions at Art House showcase the modern and contemporary works of the collection, of which the digital and electronic pieces are primarily process-based and software-driven. Walking through the house amidst “Mouse in the Machine: Nature in the Age of Digital Art,” an exhibition curated by Fournberg that examines the intersection of technology and nature (which opened June 2, 2016 and remains on view through next year), Associate Director Mira Burack explains the gravity of acquiring these technological works for the collection. Put simply, the life, and therefore the lasting impact, of the artwork is dependent on the artist’s mastery of the technology involved.

“Mouse in the Machine” fills the house with a range of approaches to the theme, including Grand Central Station No. 3 (2009), a work of 1,728 LEDs by Jim Campbell which uses data patterns and pulsing light to depict commuters walking along a platform in Manhattan’s Grand Central train station; Mesocosm (Wink, TX), a real-time computer-generated landscape by Marina Zurkow in 2012; Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’s Please Empty Your Pockets (2010), a digital conveyor belt that scans and “remembers” discrete objects; and Oil Stick Work (Angelo Martinez, Richfield, Kansas), (2008), a 3D animation by John Gerrard. Lining the main hallway is a series of deceptively simple ink drawings created by Aaron, artificial intelligence software constructed and programmed by 1960s color field painter Harold Cohen.

It is the Gerrard piece that sparks a deeper conversation about the role of the relationship between the Thoma’s collection and the Foundation’s activities. As we stand in front of the artist’s custom-built table and swivel monitor, Burack and I discuss the conservation challenges at play with technology-engaged art and philosophical questions of “what is the artwork” (i.e., a file on a hard drive?). She tells me about the digital art writing awards and research fellowships, offered by the Foundation and rooted in the collection, that support innovative individuals and pivotal initiatives engaged with these issues. “Granting is a relationship, especially when the granting organization, like the Thoma Foundation, is small. It allows for people to reach out and ask questions,” she explains. With this financial support, and the collection as a resource, the Thoma is aiming to fill the need for scholarship and criticism of digital art. Exciting major announcements about recent awards will be made public later this summer.

The Thomases have spent their lives seeking out the unexpected and the surprising in art, and it is their intention that anything they collect will eventually be donated to museums. In the meantime, they are dedicated to lending important works from all areas of the collection for a variety of exhibitions around the country. Currently, works are on loan to Art Institute of Chicago for “Doctrine and Devotion: Art of the Religious Orders in the Spanish Andes” and they maintain an ongoing loan of artworks to the Blanton Museum at the University of Texas at Austin, that rotates every year. The Foundation is also a major funder for Santa Fe’s Currents New Media Festival this year. “We believe in the creative economy,” says Marilynn Thomas. “The contribution of art to a community does not stop with its economic impact. Arts and culture enrich the lives of citizens and inspire creativity, tolerance, and a sense of shared humanity. Our foundation finds imaginative ways to integrate art into the fiber of daily life.”

—NANCY ZASTUDIL