



CORICE ARMAN: THE PARTNER

BY KATY DONOGHUE, PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE BENISTY

It's hard to get Corice Arman to talk about herself. The epitome of grace and elegance, she is a collector, a trustee of New York's Museum for African Art, has served on the board of the Guggenheim's Learning Through Arts Program and the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, and has been honored for her service in the arts by the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Tel Aviv Museum, and the National Association for Women Artists.

But the accolades are not what Corice prefers to speak of. When *Whitewall* visited her in her Tribeca home overlooking the Hudson River, she gushed about the artist Arman – her husband of 35 years who passed away in 2005. She and Arman met in the South of France in the late sixties and over the next three decades, Corice devoted herself to the support and promotion of her husband's work. They collaborated on many of his exhibitions, but also on a jaw-dropping collection of African art, antiquities, and contemporary art. During a brief time in New York between trips to Europe (one of which to work on the Arman retrospective at the Centre Pompidou, on view September 22, 2010 – January 16, 2011) Corice hosted us in her home, among Warhols, Wesslemans, hundreds of Arman's works and furniture, and many, many masks.

WHITEWALL: *Before you met Arman in Paris, you worked in fashion in New York. Tell me about that.*

CORICE ARMAN: I worked for a company that has died out since. I was a photographer/stylist. That's what I did before, and then I met Arman. Before we were married, he said to me, "You have an option: We can stay together, not get married, and you can pursue your own career, or we can get married, and then I really want you to be there for me." And I made my choice. We got married and I was there for him. But I always got a little bored, so we decided well, okay, I'll be an artist. I was one of his students, if you will, and I had a couple shows. I think people actually liked it, but I think also in all reality, I mean, I was Arman's wife, so that did put a little spin on it all. I loved fashion, so I remember taking a couture dress and opening it from the seams, all the way under the armpit, and then you would have two sides and a hole in the middle for the neck. I would stretch it like skin on a frame, and that was my art. But it didn't come from the gut — I was an artist because I had nothing else to do, and that's not what being an artist is all about.

WW: *I read that you said, "I was good at it, but I didn't eat it, sleep it, drink it..."*

CA: Exactly, exactly. It has to be all you want to do in life when you're an artist. I decided I would rather be there for Arman and be there as his pillar.

WW: *When did the two of you start collecting?*

CA: Oh, Arman was collecting African art way before he met me. He was collecting avidly, and he taught me so much. I didn't know about art until I met Arman. Picasso, yes, but anyone else and I had no idea.

I enjoyed collecting with him, and he was the motivator, no doubt about it. Arman was a collector from the beginning. I learned a great deal, and I now champion African art. I am a board member for the Museum for African Art, which opens in February [of next year] on Museum Mile. I have been there almost since its inception.

WW: *How do you think the collection changed once you started buying together?*

CA: Well, I didn't like anything that was skeletal. So he would not buy anything or even try to put me in that direction except for he came home one afternoon and he said, "Corice, I know you hate all skeleton or skulls, but I saw something at the gallery, and I know you hate that type of thing, but I saw this and it was really great." So what did I do? I ran straight out and bought it because it was his birthday. It was reverse psychology, if you will, because he knew if he bought it, it would never be allowed to stay in the house. I ran out and got it for him because it was very difficult to get him anything.

WW: *A lot of Arman's work seems to come from a serious collecting habit.*

CA: Exactly! And, if he didn't have time to go and buy things, he'd just take whatever was in the household. In the seventies he started making a series of works where he would slice everything in the house. I would look for my iron, for my vacuum cleaner, and I'd just look on the wall and there it was in a work of art. It was really fun. He also did things called "Robot Portraits," where he would take your personal belongings and put them in a box and display it. He only did it for people that he knew. It was always a gift.

WW: *That was compelled by his relationship with you.*

CA: Yes. And for my portrait, I think I was taking courses and I came home that afternoon, and ta-da! There was my portrait. It was for my 27th birthday. He put a diamond ring in there, I had just bought a brand-new Louis Vuitton envelope bag and he had stuck it in there, and a lot of other things. When I was looking for stuff, I would just go and check the portrait, and if it was there, well that's where it was. The only thing I hate about the portrait was in the seventies with those big clunky shoes, which are coming back into fashion today!



WW: *If you were to do a “Robot Portrait” of him, what are some of the things you’d put in there?*

CA: Good lord, it’d have to be as big as this house! Oh, my word. He loved music, and he knew music very well. He loved books; he read all sorts of books. He liked games also, but he was a master at playing chess. That was his main friendship with Marcel Duchamp. He was so thrilled when he first came to New York to meet Marcel Duchamp, and rather than saying, “I’m an artist,” and all that, he started talking chess to Duchamp. He would play with him every week, and it wasn’t about his work at all. We have a few things that Duchamp made for him. I had the honor and the pleasure of meeting Duchamp the same year that he died.

WW: *I imagine that a lot of the pieces here have those kinds of stories.*

CA: They do, they really do. They have, and it’s funny because Arman would sometimes go out and buy something and then he’d bring it home, and he’d put it somewhere and wait until . . .

WW: *For you to find it?* [Laughter]

CA: If he was really excited, he would look at it and inspect it and find all the books that we have to see if it’s in a book. He was passionate, and he taught me that passion. I learned to collect because of him. Now I have a collection of perfume bottles, I collect Tiffany lamps, and I love antiquities. Before that, it was not my realm. It wasn’t my world. I always said that the African art is our collection. The antiquities and the Tiffany lamps are my collection. It’s a wonderful journey, a truly wonderful journey.

WW: *I noticed the Tom Wesselmann over the elevator.*

CA: We collected our contemporaries, yes. They traded with one another. But over the years, we purchased pieces. We used to have a beautiful Stella. We used to have a Basquiat. Arman loved trading in, moving things around . . . and I enjoy collecting and

changing, but not to the degree that Arman truly enjoyed that.

WW: *And I imagine that you lend a lot?*

CA: Oh yes, we lend a lot. We lend a lot.

WW: *I also read that you purchased back some of Arman’s earlier works so that you could better lend them to museums, so that they weren’t just sitting in someone’s homes.*

CA: For museum shows. It’s good that they’re in collections, but we wanted to have a nucleus of works. But you don’t want to have a show where everything is owned by you. You know, like, “Did this guy ever sell his works? Why does he have everything?” [Laughter]

WW: *I wanted to ask you about the importance of legacy. You sit on so many institution boards, like the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, the Committee for Women at the Apollo in Harlem, Cooper Union, and the Museum for African Art. You participate in several educational programs like the Learning Through Art program at the Guggenheim Museum.*

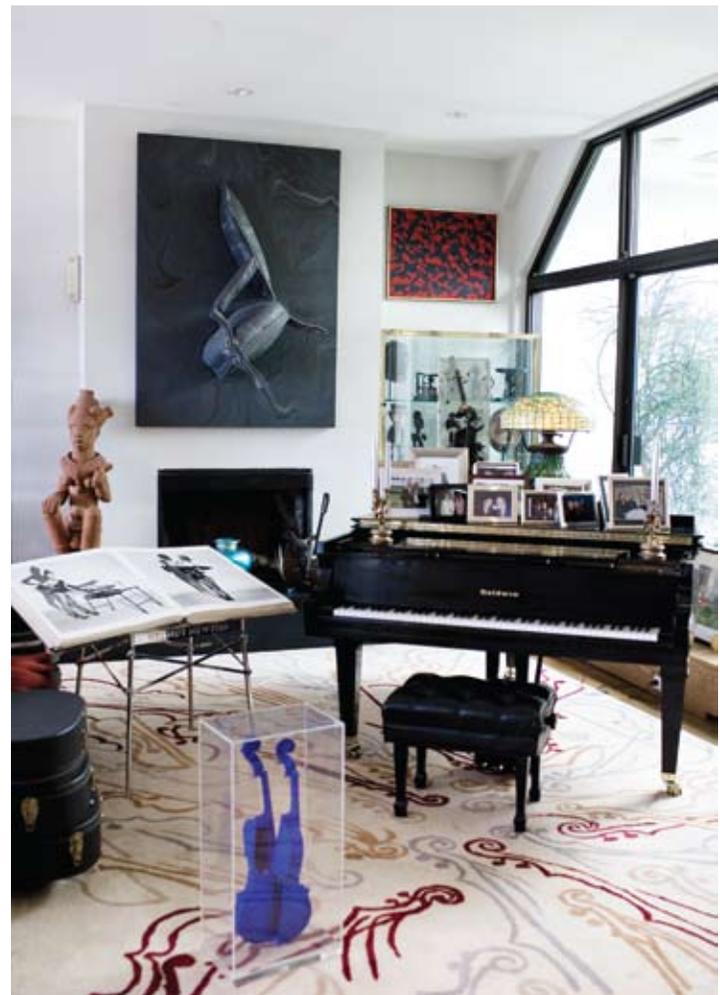
CA: It’s very important to me because it’s a way of giving back. I think in our society, if you’ve had a good life you must give back, and to share what you have with others in the best way that you can. And I would like to create more things. We have to find ways to take care of these people who do not have the possibilities that we have. And it doesn’t have to do with art, but just give something back, being aware of your surroundings, and just trying to help the best way you can.

WW: *I was reading a speech that Lowery Sims gave about you for the National Association of Women in the Arts. She ended it by saying, “Corice is the real deal: mother, collector, patron, enthusiast, and she embodies the life well lived.”*

CA: Wow.



Previous spread, left: Corice Arman in front of portraits of her and Arman by Andy Warhol. Opposite page: a collection of Bakoto reliquary figures in the dining room. This page: the living room is home to Arman's artwork, furniture, and African art collection.



WW: *Would you agree with her description of you?*

CA: You know, me, as an individual, I cannot say that about myself — if that's how I live, well, then, better for me. You don't perceive yourself the way other people see you. While I was in Spain in February I received an envelope from a family member, one of my husband's first cousins. It was full of letters, holiday cards, reading "Happy New Year." They were all handmade by the students of a grade school. The letters said that the teacher, their art teacher, loved Arman, and she started teaching classes about Arman. One of the children in her class said her grandfather was Arman's first cousin, and so they wrote me all these letters. They said, "Dear Corice, Arman was a wonderful artist, you're wonderful, and we're inspired by Arman." Oh, I got hundreds of cards from these kids. I was in bed reading each one and I was just crying and crying. Many of them said that we hope you can visit us. So I sent a message to my assistant saying I have to find time to visit them before school ends. I went last week. They were so excited; they had prepared some works in the garden of the school influenced by Arman, if you will, with accumulations. They were so proud to show them to me, and they did a show for me, a concert. They were just so thrilled, and I was so touched by that.

WW: *Tell me about the portraits Warhol did of you and Arman.*

CA: We were very friendly with Warhol. The one [of me] with the blue background was done in 1977, and it was the first one done below the shoulders. Then he was here 10 years later — I was always giving Arman birthday parties — and Andy looked at it and looked at me and said, "Oh, Corice, you need an update." So he did the other two, the yellow and red. I asked him to do Arman's portrait around 86, 87, just before he died. And Arman put them all together like this. People think it's just one painting. The year that Andy died he was here — actually, it's in his diary — he went, "I was starving, but I didn't tell Corice," or something like that. But anyhow, as he was leaving, the elevator door was closing and Jasmine [was with us] and he sticks his finger at her

just before the door closes and says, "I want her hair just like that for the portrait." He was going to do Jasmine's portrait, and I had put her hair up in a little bun on top of her head. And that was the last time we saw him. He was a friend, and when you're in that mix, you don't say Warhol, you're all just part of the group.

WW: *Would that have been his first portrait of a child?*

CA: It would've been the first. And it might have been something else that developed after, because after my portrait below the shoulders, he did a couple others. Arman wanted it for Mother's Day. I was very fortunate because Arman had my portraits done by many artists. I have my portrait by George Segal, and I thought, "I'm very fortunate — my husband likes to see me hanging around the house." [Laughter]

WW: *Well, of course, look at you!*

CA: But it was great. He was just an inspiration to so many people and to me, most of all. And it was reciprocal in the sense that I think I gave him things that he didn't have, and he, in exchange, gave me a lot.

WW: *It's wonderful to hear you talk about him. You were so in love, it's obvious.*

CA: I was, but he wasn't easy. There was this great cartoon from the *New Yorker* where you have the king, slouched in his throne with a big belly, unshaven, his hair's a mess, and his crown is to the side. And the queen, walking tall and straight, going down this long corridor, says to her lady-in-waiting, "He may not be the easiest person to live with, but he's a damn good provider." Arman loved that cartoon. I took it out and put it on our doorframe. It was so perfect. It was so Arman. My son, Philippe, when he was about five or six, did something and I was angry with him so I said, "Philippe, you're getting old now, you have to grow up." And he said, "I don't ever want to grow up. I want to be just like Daddy."