

AMERICANS







ITH THE NEGATIVE PRESS that the U.S. often garners abroad-whether about Wall Street corruption, intractable wars or a divisive presidential campaign—there's one category in which our standing remains untarnished: high art.

Like Jackson Pollock's drip paintings and Christo and Jeanne-Claude's wrapped buildings, contemporary American artists have a reputation for making beautiful, challenging work-and, in doing so, reflecting back who we are as a nation. Since 1986 the Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies (FAPE), a nonprofit now led by collector and philanthropist Jo Carole Lauder, has acted as a kind of global curator for our national psyche, placing preeminent American art in consulates and embassies around the world-and allowing luminaries like Ellsworth Kelly and Louise Bourgeois to serve as our cultural ambassadors abroad.

In the 1960s, the State Department inaugurated a program called Art in Embassies, primarily as a vehicle to provide temporary art for ambassadors' residences during their diplomatic tenure. In 1986, Leonore Annenberg, former chief of protocol for President Reagan and wife of former U.S. Ambassador to the U.K. Walter Annenberg. launched FAPE, along with other diplomats' wives. By exploiting their formidable connections to the artist and patron community, these women were able to help pay for extensive redecoration projects (including the U.S. Embassy's residence in London), fund much-needed restoration, and both purchase and solicit donations for embassies from preeminent artists to build what would become an enduring, important collection. Although the seeds of the foundation's legacy were growing, the scope was still small.

In 1996 leadership passed to Jo Carole Lauder, the wife of Ronald Lauder; she steered the foundation away from simply supplying loaner art to diplomatic residences and instead toward building a permanent collection at American embassies in more than 140 countries. Lauder quickly transformed what had been an elite, rarefied program into something more accessible and democratic. "Embassies are the visible face of our country," says Yale's fast-talking dean of art, Robert Storr, who moonlights as chairman of the organization's professional fine arts committee and guides its curatorial mission. "The art installed in and around

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those government buildings allows foreigners to have | changing in a way that's wonderfully permanent." a glimpse of our cultural production.

With certain site-specific installations, the art has been created with its architectural environment in mind. At the Charles Gwathmey-designed United States Mission to the U.N. in New York City (a federal building where dignitaries meet and greet), the State Department brought the foundation into the design process early, so Gwathmey could collaborate with artists as he designed the building. From the Sol LeWitt painting on the dome of the 70-foot-high rotunda to the spectacular Odili Donald Odita elevator mural, the art and architecture flow together seamlessly. Standing under the blue LeWitt dome, visitors are engaged with the art rather than just passively looking at it. "There are a lot of things in the USUN that are not standard issue." Storr explains. "The point is not to just put up feel-good art, but to pay close attention to a standard of sophistication. The one thing we don't do is just decorate."

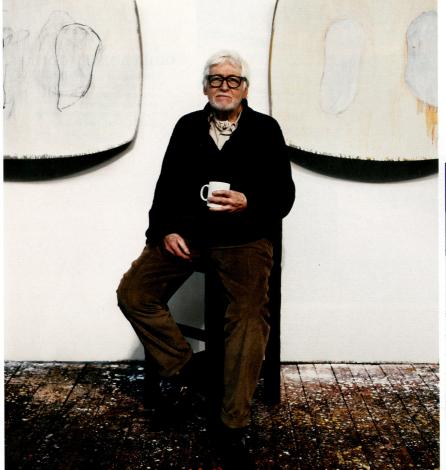
"So many things in today's world are fleeting," adds Lauder. "Having facilitated the collaboration between our country's best architects and artists, I can see things

At the American embassy in Beijing, visitors are greeted by two 18-foot-high sculptures by Ellsworth Kelly. Three aluminum panels are mounted on the walls outside-on one side, two red and one yellow, and on the other, red, white and blue. "I am very patriotic; that's why I've done this," says the 88-year-old artist, laughing, "And because of Jo Carole!" Kelly also considered how Chinese citizens would react emotionally as they waited in line for their visas. "When people ask me what my paintings mean," he says, "I say, 'It isn't a question of what it means-ask yourself, how does it make you feel?'"

The foundation's president, Eden Rafshoon, who runs the D.C. office, underscores Kelly's point about the effects of modern art. "Whether people understand it or not, its mere presence works subliminally. If it weren't there, people would feel differently." In that way, the art in our embassies program waves a less obvious cultural flag for America: proof that freedom of expression. opportunity, and unity through diversity are values for which American artists stand. •

PATRON SAINT Jo Carole Laude right, and Odil front of "Light and ision," the elevato for the United States Mission to in New York City





RON GORCHOV

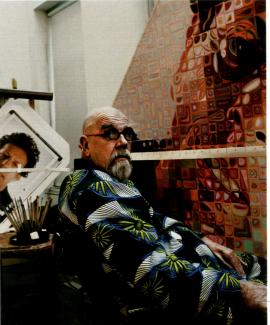
"The only comparison would be a duet in music," Gorchov says of the juxtaposition of his "Totem," a 19-foot-tall, hand-painted sculpture in the USUN building, with Sol LeWitt's painting on the dome of the rotunda above.



CHUCK CLOSE

"The embassies are full of paintings of dead white men," says Close, whose portrait of the late Roy Lichtenstein was created for the foundation's print collection. "I thought at least one of them ought to be an artist."



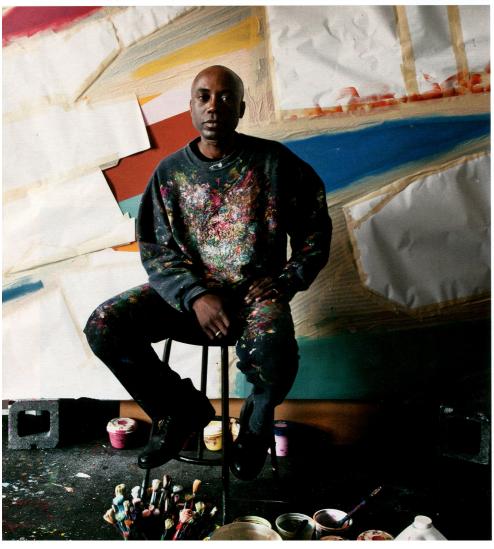




ODILI DONALD ODITA

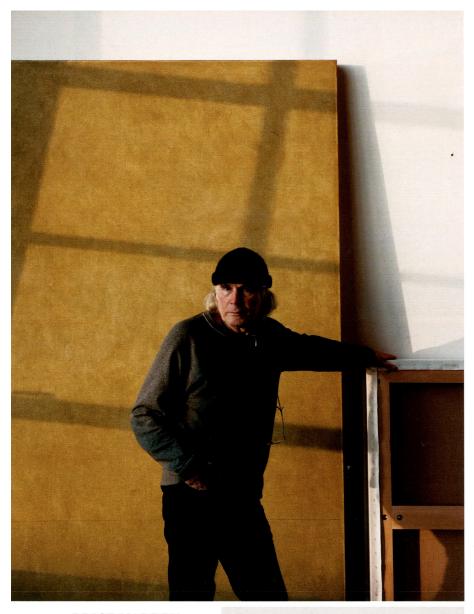
"Growing up as a Nigerian in America, I have a sense of what it means to come to this country and make dreams come true," says Odita, whose mural surrounds the USUN-building elevators.











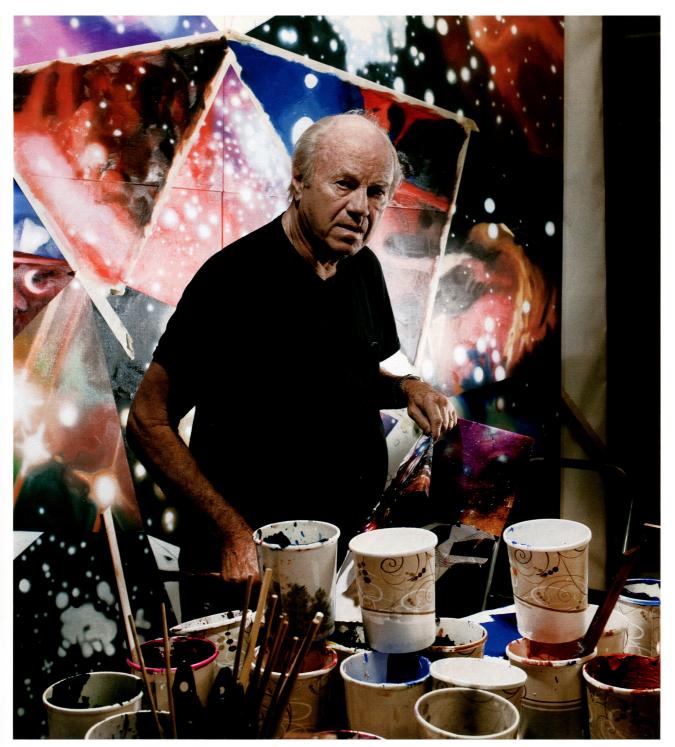
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BRICE MARDEN

"I tend not to think that the government is a very good client, so I tend to avoid it—but it's an important client," says Marden, whose "First Etched Letter" was made in a limited edition of 50 prints. "It's a chance to place some of your work where people are going to see it. You make the work hoping that it can have an effect."





JAMES ROSENQUIST

"Lauder and others are putting artwork in embassies so people can see what we're up to," says Rosenquist, who painted "The Stars and Stripes at the Speed of Light" for the foundation's print collection. "There's a history of America wanting to show the world that it's intelligent and has some feeling about art."