

DESIGN & REALTY

home

# COLLECT CALLING

An international businessman's home and art collection share  
a mysterious passion for adventure and exploration.

*By Michele Meyer // Photography by Jenn Duncan*

"Are you in a cult?" a cocktail party guest once asked Ken Christie upon entering his lair. The globe-trotting energy consultant and art collector took no offense. "I wear my feelings on my walls," he likes to say. The walls, in his case, are an ivy-cloaked former Rice Military warehouse that's 6,000 square feet of what at first appears to be an art gallery. The farther you burrow, the deeper you plunge into Christie's psyche. It can be morbid, joyful and even disturbing, but it's always thought-provoking.

His vast living room-cum-gallery separates art appreciators from the unimaginative. Smack in the middle is a marble sculpture of two naked women strangling a nude man. "I like strong art," says the self-taught collector of Chinese artist Lu Zhengyuan's post-paradise sculpture of Adam's wives exacting payback. "Art that hits me in the gut and the heart."

Nearby hang three haunting portraits by Mexico's Arturo Rivera. "He has the mind of Poe and hand of Rembrandt,"



Christie says. “Riviera goes deep into the soul—and between life and death. [I am] intrigued by the demons hiding behind the creative process. People are afraid of darkness, but you must embrace it to have light.”

The well-read Christie peppers conversations with quotes. It’s not to impress, but because he’s fueled by rumination of philosophers, including Henry David Thoreau, who voices one of Christie’s greatest fears: “I wished to live deliberately and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

Since childhood on his family’s farm in Innisfail, Alberta—an hour north of Calgary—Christie has been a dreamer, eager to explore. That’s why he became an energy consultant 30 years ago. “I didn’t care about a barrel of oil,” he says. “I wanted adventure.” And, well, he got it. Christie has had pistols pressed against his temple “I can’t count the times,” and once hid with Tunisia’s president during a revolution. “Life is a great journey, and I want to squeeze every drop from it. I’ve lived to the hilt, in crazy places—addicted to danger.” Among 57 countries, he’s roved Japan, Thailand, Korea and Scandinavia, thriving as a collector not only of art but also experiences, conversations and collaborations. “It’s not just the art, but the doors it’s opened.”

Christie discovered Houston in the mid-’90s, and after years of leasing apartments for brief visits, he found his current abode, in ruins. “It spoke to me,” he says, and in what others saw as a teardown, he saw destiny. He fired three architects before meeting Scott Strasser, who ultimately understood the vision and helped him completely gut the place from top to bottom. Even the concrete floor needed repouring, and an entire second story of living quarters was added to transform it into the ultimate bachelor pad.

It took 18 months to renovate, and Christie still spent most of his time abroad for nearly a decade before officially moving in and making it his permanent home. Finally, in 2014, he checked in for good and reunited his artwork collection, which was scattered in various storage spaces across the globe. “When shipments arrived, the art fit together,” Christie marveled. “I think it’s the underlying theme of the eternal exploration of ourselves.”

Common threads include bold hues, surrealism, found wood and women with defiant or enigmatic eyes. Hearts are another motif, partly evidenced by a huge Zhengyuan canvas that seems to pulsate alongside a crimson amber urn. Nearby is armor of a 16th century Edo

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Clockwise from left: Gallery walls divide the main living spaces, allowing for the display of art but low enough to keep the space open beneath skylights and the industrial ceiling; a canvas by Chinese artist Lu Zhengyuan; the Zen master bathroom; another view of the main living area, which features several gallery nooks, seating areas and even a foosball table.



From top: Homeowner and art collector Ken Christie; a plush blue sofa frames one of the many sitting areas, while the kitchen bar and dining room are located behind.

...CONTINUED Japanese samurai—Christie champions their philosophy: “Death before dishonor.” Meanwhile, a movie poster for the 1973 film *Papillon* also serves as a message. “A convict pleads his case and the judge says, ‘You’re guilty of a much more serious crime: the crime of a wasted life.’ When I saw it, I vowed I wouldn’t miss another moment.”

A ceramic rhinoceros head by one of his two college-age sons, both artists, is beautifully lit. His other son’s photo of a spiral staircase hangs in Christie’s bedroom.

Downstairs is open and free, and there are several seating areas that make it great for Christie’s many parties. Nature also plays a part in this industrial world, and part of the 15-foot ceiling peels back to create a glassed-in enclave of river birch trees. “He brought the outside in and the inside out,” Christie says of architect Strasser.

The power canvases on the main level are on red brick or boldly colored plaster walls, but the upstairs world is tranquil and bathed in white. “It’s my Zen space,” Christie says. His askew platform bed is custom made from his own pencil sketch. Mark Twain’s *Joan of Arc* currently rests by its side. “Usually it’s biographies of great adventurers,” he says. And above, a large white canvas by McKay

Otto has lights that slowly dim, lulling him to sleep.

This entire world, however, is punctuated by the towering, 6-foot-3 Christie, who is himself the home’s most fascinating piece of art. Buff and a fashion rule breaker, he often wears shirts open with pocket scarves or his favorite shawl-necked navy tuxedo. Dark denim or trim trousers are paired with equally immaculate John Varvatos boots or studded Christian Louboutin loafers. On his wrist, bold Devon Steampunk and Bovet Sportster watches count down to his next adventure.

Christie awakes with the sun and roams his gallery while drinking a pot of French dark roast black coffee. At night, he pours a glass of Mendoza malbec or Paso Robles cabernet sauvignon before switching on hypnotic music by Philip Glass and roaming the house, piece by piece, “reliving the memories.” For all the looking back, he never forgets the mantra that started the art collection. It’s etched not only in his psyche, but also in an arm tattoo from the Christie clan’s coat of arms: *sic viresco*—Latin for “Thus I flourish.” “I have an obligation to my ancestors, an obligation to carry on—and live life to the fullest.” ■

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—KEN CHRISTIE, HOMEOWNER  
AND ART COLLECTOR »

