



Right: Meet the Meeks, the family behind Naples' Harmon-Meek Gallery, clockwise from top left: father William, daughter Kristine, mother Barbara and daughter Juliana. Artwork by Hunt Slonem. Left: Works from Hunt Slonem, Reynier Llanes and Robert Vickerey.



For the Meek sisters, lessons in art appreciation started early. Kristine, the elder of the two, was told that when she took her first steps as a toddler, she walked straight to touch a sculpture. During her preschool years, she'd often accompany her parents to artists' studios, where she'd find ways to occupy her time. On a family visit to see abstract expressionist sculptor Ibram Lassaw, the New York-based artist gave her a couple of pencils to bang against one of his metal works, a simple act that showed the child that it is never too early to interact with art.

Juliana, who is two years younger, remembers she and her sister playing with dollhouses. But unlike most kids', theirs were filled with real-life miniature works gifted by the likes of living artists such as Hunt Slonem, Bob Kane and John Falato. "We were probably the only girls to have real art in their dollhouses growing up," Juliana says. "Art was completely interwoven throughout our childhood, even in play."

It's only fitting that the sisters now carry the torch their parents ignited some 48 years ago when their father, William, joined the art institution—then simply called The Harmon Galley— as assistant director.

Back then, before this area even had a fine art museum, major American artists recognized the gallery as an emerging dealer of fine art, thanks to the vision of founder Foster Harmon. The established gallerist had deep connections

ARTS+CULTURE

## NAPLES' FIRST FAMILY OF FINE ART

After a childhood infused with art, sisters Kristine and Juliana continue their family's legacy at Harmon-Meek, Florida's longest-running American art gallery.

By Nila Do Simon

Photography by Erik Keller





STATE OF THE ART

Kristine Meek (left) and Juliana Meek (right) posing in front of Hunt Slonem pieces.



to the art world in Chicago and New York City. In hopes of expanding the gallery's reach, William bought the company in 1972 and later changed the name to Harmon-Meek Gallery.

Over the years, Harmon-Meek added more living giants representing various genres—realist Robert Vickrey, floral artist Philip Morsberger, and narrative painter Gabriela Gonzalez Dellosso. Among the gallery's primary criteria, the team has long maintained that artists featured must have permanent collections in museums. The artists are already established by the time they get to Harmon-Meek, but the gallerists' respect for the artists and the way they help further cultivate talent, has earned the family quite a reputation. In the '80s, when the art world seemed to hit a minor recession, Sally Avery, wife to Milton, the famed painter often called the "American Matisse," memorably told crowds at an opening at the Whitney in New York City, that a "little gallery at the edge of the Everglades" had just sold \$250,000 worth of her husband's work. Later, prominent art collector Joseph Hirshhorn, whose extensive collection helped establish the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., told William that he decided to move to Naples with his wife, even though the Hirshhorns could live anywhere, because if the community could support a gallery like Harmon-Meek, then this was the kind of place he wanted to live.

Outside the gallery, William and his wife, Barbara, made strides to create a stronger cultural identity in Naples. When the Naples Philharmonic Center for the Arts (now Artis—Naples) was in its infancy, the couple encouraged its founder, Myra Janco Daniels, to include an art museum within the space. William reached out to his artist friends to donate works, procuring \$2 million worth of pieces, including a Milton Avery original. The space eventually turned into The Baker Museum.

Back at the gallery, the couple dew art aficionados by maintaining a hefty schedule of exhibits and sponsoring gallery field trips for local students.



#### STATE OF THE ART

From left: William and Barbara at work; Juliana at her home in Naples, surrounded by Danish mid-century modern furniture and pieces from renowned artists Louis Bosa, Walter Meigs and Igor Galanin; a book on Danish modern design.

Meanwhile, his daughters were out testing other waters. Even though they grew up working in the family business (“I was paid a cent for every stamp I put on envelopes,” Juliana says), the sisters pursued their own endeavors after graduating high school. Kristine studied communications and earned a master’s degree in business. Juliana graduated with a bachelor’s degree in business, a master’s in engineering management and attended law school. During her one art appreciation class in college, Kristine remembers seeing a familiar work of art featured on the slide projector. It was a sculpture by Ibram Lassaw, “the guy whose sculpture I banged on when I was a kid,” Kristine says. After class, she discussed the artist with the professor and quickly deduced that she knew more about Lassaw than the instructor did. “I stopped taking art history courses after that,” Kristine says.

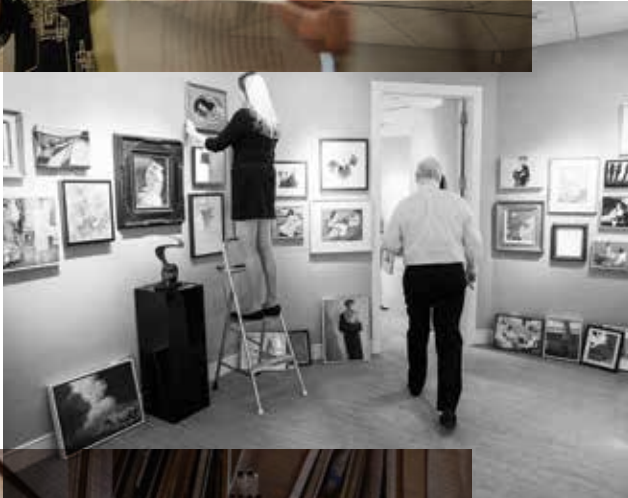
She would go on to work in major gifts fundraising at nonprofits such as The Conservation Fund and African Wildlife Foundation. Juliana took a different route, moving to Washington, D.C., to become a cyber threat intelligence agent. Her quick

thinking and even-tempered personality earned her fast praise, as she reached the GS-14 grade (the second-highest pay level for federal employees) before turning 30 years old. She was one of the experts who briefed policy makers on potential global threats. But as she says, “It was not happy work.”

In 2012, the two of them came to the same decision. Within six months of each other, both quit their jobs and moved back to Naples. Kristine craved the entrepreneurial nature of owning a business and missed curating art shows, a task she had previously done for the gallery. Juliana’s reasoning was just as simple: “While working as a cyber threat intelligence agent, I was following all the evil in the world, and now I get to follow all the beauty.”

Today, Harmon-Meek Gallery still remains an intimate family business, though with a few noticeable additions. The gallery, which has moved three times in its nearly 60-year history, has found a 1,400-square-foot home on the third floor of the Capital Bank Center. In 2015, a year after Kristine and Juliana were named part-owners of the company, the Meeks opened a second gallery,





Harmon-Meek | modern. The spaces share a similar scope, though the newer gallery's 2,800 square feet allows for group shows, and the higher ceilings are more suitable for showing larger works of art.

As much as things may change, much remains the same. The parents still go into the galleries regularly, Barbara to do the accounting and William to forge relationships with museum directors and curators on behalf of the artists they represent. Every fall, Juliana and William visit artists in their studios to select pieces for the galleries. It's an old-school approach. In this digital age, most selections are done by email or internet, but William has been stocking his gallery the same way since 1972—a step he learned from his mentor Harmon.

"Visiting artists allows us to see what direction they are going in," says Juliana, who relays the new nuances to the collectors. "It's that in-person handshake that builds trust and relationships."

It's not just artists that the sisters connect with; it's their works, as well. Both have amassed sizable personal collections, or "more artwork than we have space for in our home," Juliana says. Mostly purchased of their own accord with a few gifted directly from the artists themselves, the pieces in their collections are proud badges of the sisters' personal relationship with art.

Just as art became a natural extension of their lives, the Meek sisters look to weave the discipline into the lives of the next generation. For the past five years, the gallery has hosted an annual fundraiser, which distributes grants to local children's arts programs. To date, the gallery has raised \$150,000 for arts-related programming in the community.

Before his daughters became part-owners, their father, in his usual self-deprecating manner, used to say, "Art dealers are like fine watercolors: They just fade away."

Given the gallery's heritage and with Kristine and Juliana now at the helm, this might be one time their father's predictions about art prove to be wrong. ■

#### STATE OF THE ART

From top: The Meeks confer with a client; Juliana assembling a show; William pulls paintings for an exhibition