



Good as GOLD

MARY FISHER'S HOME REFLECTS HER LIFE'S WORK AS AN ARTIST AND ACTIVIST, AND HONORS THOSE SHE'S MET ALONG THE WAY

By Mary Murray | Photography by Jerry Rabinowitz

Entering artist Mary Fisher's West Palm Beach apartment is like unboxing an eclectic time capsule. Many items, alike only in their uniqueness, allude to a moment or constant from her multilayered life. Red high-heeled boots from her walk-on appearance in the Broadway musical *Kinky Boots* rest in a place of honor on a bookshelf. Photographer Leni Riefenstahl's *Africa* tome lies open on Fisher's coffee table; she changes the pages daily as a way to commune with a continent so dear to her

heart. A shining composition emblazoned with the words "I am an olive tree bathed in the golden light of you" has traveled to every place she's called home over the last several decades. Now, in her high-rise overlooking the Intracoastal, it imbues her dining room with a welcoming aura and reassuring warmth—two characteristics one cannot help but notice within Fisher.

"It's a meditative spot for me," Fisher says of the artwork by Peter Stephens. "Every home I've had it in, it's taken on a new



FISHER OFTEN REFLECTS UPON THIS PETER STEPHENS WORK, ENTITLED OLIVE TREE.

OPPOSITE PAGE: HER LIVING ROOM FEATURES A RODIN SCULPTURE AND A DIPTYCH BY SANDRO CHIA.



FISHER'S OFFICE AREA INCLUDES THIS MIRROR ARTWORK ENTITLED *STAR QUARTERS* BY ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG.

“If my experience, strength, and hope can help other people, then I’m there.”



IN ADDITION TO THE VISUAL ARTS, MUSIC HAS BEEN A CONSTANT IN FISHER'S LIFE. SHE PLAYS THE CELLO AND THE PIANO, AND WILL HEAD TO HER PIANO BENCH WHEN IN NEED OF RELAXATION.

life and a new feeling. Here, it's becoming even more special. I love nature, and I love the colors and structure of it and the fact that it's done in four pieces but it all fits together. For me, it's a very spiritual piece of art.”

It seems only fitting that Fisher would find solace underneath an olive tree, a symbol of peace and friendship. Since being diagnosed HIV positive in 1991, she has become a renowned advocate for HIV/AIDS awareness. She's spoken and written about her own journey with the disease, which currently afflicts more than 1.1 million people in the United States. She's also forged relationships with members of the community around the world, making it her personal mission to support female sufferers in particular. “If I can help others or if my experience, strength, and hope can help other people, then I'm there,” she says.

A very private public figure, Fisher grew up adjacent to the spotlight. Her stepfather, Max Fisher, was an oil and real estate mogul, philanthropist, and presidential advisor. Fisher dabbled in politics, too, as the first female in the advance team of President Gerald Ford. In the 1980s, she shifted her focus to pursuing art full-time and, later, to raising her two sons. But when Fisher learned she'd contracted HIV from her then-husband, she was faced with a moral dilemma: Do I suffer silently, or do I use my resources and the years I have left to further the cause?



FISHER'S HOME, INCLUDING HER BEDROOM (BELOW), SHOWCASES ART AND SOUVENIRS FROM HER TRAVELS. THE ABOVE SCULPTURE IS *EUROPA WITH THE BULL* BY ALBERT WEIN, WHICH SITS BESIDE A DRAWING BY JULES PASCIN. SHE RETRIEVED THE SET OF COCO DE MER PICTURED RIGHT IN THE SEYCHELLES.



After taking time to reflect and process her diagnosis, Fisher opted for the latter. In 1992, she delivered a speech called "A Whisper of AIDS" at the Republican National Convention in Houston.

"For me, it was doing what I believed was the right thing to do," Fisher says of the 13-minute oration that launched her onto the international advocacy stage. "I spoke out because if I didn't speak out then [my children] would never grow up to learn that they could speak out. I guarantee you I was not the best mother, but the one thing that was important to me was they would know that if you believe in something strongly enough, you will stand up for it and you will do the right thing."

In the years that followed, Fisher continued to speak out in support of HIV/AIDS awareness in an effort to break the stigma surrounding the disease. She also formed the Family AIDS Research and Education Fund (now the Mary Fisher Clinical AIDS Research and Education Fund) and penned a



FISHER JUXTAPOSES HER OWN WORK, INCLUDING THE PORTRAITS PICTURED ABOVE AND FABRICS FROM HER LEE JOFA COLLECTION, WITH SCULPTURES BY ARTISTS LIKE DUSTIN YELLIN (LEFT) AND DONALD DE LUE (ABOVE).

memoir. Released in 1996, *My Name is Mary* was about Fisher facing death, a struggle she chronicled for the sake of her children. "I wanted them to have some history of their family," she says. "In those early days, it was [about] loving them in a way they would remember."

Fisher never expected to live into the new millennium. But, with the advent of life-sustaining antiretroviral (ARV) therapies, she was once again able to envision a future,

one marked by a call to help others and express herself creatively. In 2004, she combined her artistic skills with her passion for philanthropy to develop The Good Deed Collection, a jewelry line designed by Fisher and handmade by African women dealing with AIDS and other hardships.

"When medication became available, it was very clear to me that people weren't just going to die, but in order to live they needed to be

able to support themselves," Fisher says of the project, which financially benefits the makers. "I've been blessed, and they're my family. You take care of those you love."

One of the cornerstones of the collection is the 100 Good Deeds Bracelet, comprising 100 beads wearers can use to signify ways in which they've helped others. Fisher describes it as both a call to do good deeds and, on a larger scale, a strategy to empower women. "It's about the very small deeds in our community—in your church, school, synagogue, where you work—just doing something special for somebody without anybody really knowing," she explains.

Beyond the 100 Good Deeds Bracelet on her wrist and the Africa photography book in her living room, Fisher's home abounds with references to her travels and the individuals she's met along the way. Textiles, pottery, and masks from her trips are scattered throughout the apartment. Small portraits of memorable faces—each symbolizing a person helped, a struggle overcome, a story told—line a hallway. These images are not prints but rather digitally embroidered photographs on woven fabrics. "It's a stitching because I'm a weaver," Fisher notes. "There are a lot of layers."



This concept of layering is key to Fisher's artistry. She started weaving when she was in the seventh grade and has always been drawn to mixing media to build a layered look. "There's depth in it," she says. "I like to see depth in things, because there is."

Her large studio on South Dixie Highway is full of the trappings of her craft, including countless sheets of handmade paper and numerous spools of yarn. Her home, however, is her sanctuary. While she may pick up a needlepoint to relax and clear her head, she never works on larger projects within her apartment.

And yet, Fisher surrounds herself with pieces by artists she adores, as well as references to her own oeuvre and experiences. Fabrics from her collection with Lee Jofa cover chairs, sofas, and pillows that reside near works by Auguste Rodin, Sandro Chia, Dustin Yellin, and Isabelle de Borchgrave. Family photos share shelves with miniature replicas of rooms from her past, doll house-like recreations she made during times of poorer health.

Throughout her struggle with HIV, and a more recent battle with breast cancer, Fisher has always turned to art as a form of catharsis. She's also

employed it as a weapon of awareness. In her second memoir, *Messenger*, she recounts one such moment when she used art to bring a personal message of HIV/AIDS to the public—and was met with resistance.

In 1995, she set about creating a one-woman exhibition to be displayed in the rotunda at the Russell Senate Office Building in Washington, D.C. But when the powers that be heard she was including an ornamental coffin decorated with a statement from one of her speeches, "Let us unite in life rather than in death," they canceled the show. Fisher refused to remove the piece, and the exhibit was later presented in the Carpenters Union Building. Through it all, Fisher writes that she learned "art has a power words alone may not convey."

More than 20 years later, Fisher still displays that coffin at her West Palm studio—a reminder that we can all tap into our innate creativity in order to tell pivotal stories and inspire change. "Without artists, I don't know that we'd have a history of where our world has come from and where our world might be at the moment," she says. "I think art does that. I think we all do it together." <<

FISHER PURCHASED THESE AMERICAN INDIAN MASKS WHILE TRAVELING IN ALASKA AND ACQUIRED THESE LARGE PAINT BRUSHES IN JAPAN.



OPPOSITE PAGE: FISHER FASHIONED THIS PORTABLE FIBER SKETCHBOOK SO THAT SHE COULD STITCH WHILE TRAVELING. THE DIORAMA IN THE BACKGROUND IS A REPLICATION OF HER MOTHER AND FATHER'S ROOM IN MICHIGAN.



"Art has a power words alone may not convey."