

# FORT GANSEVOORT

## The Washington Post

**Six years after the fire, Peggy Cooper Cafritz has a new home and collection**

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Peggy Cooper Cafritz, art patron, education advocate and Washington grande dame, knows what it's like to live with art and to be forced to live without it.

She passionately prefers the former, and in recent years in an ultra-modern condominium in Dupont Circle has elevated the concept into something of an art in itself.

"I think it has a mark of home," Cafritz, 67, says of the two-level apartment she has carved out in a steel-gray and glass building on embassy-lined Massachusetts Avenue NW. "You might say I live in an art gallery, and it could have been that, but it's a home."

Indeed, it's a place where young folks — artists and others — are often stopping by to check on her, or bunking in a spare room for a night or weekend. And as every homeowner knows — especially those who have built from ground zero — a home is an ongoing project.

With the interior furnished and filled with new contemporary artworks, "I am beginning very, very, very, very slowly to work on the balconies," says the co-founder of the Duke Ellington School of the Arts and former president of D.C.'s school board.

Cafritz is a striking woman with trademark close-cropped hair delicately surrounding an oval face. On this August afternoon she's wearing a graphic gray-and-white shirt, black pants and black-and-white lace-ups. The shoes are especially brilliant, the white blindingly so, the black a polished obsidian.

"I have always liked paintings more than I've liked Yves Saint Laurent dresses," Cafritz says. "So my wardrobe pops are shoes and earrings. Everything in between is a painting."

Also in Fall Home & Design: "They'll have to carry me out of here in a box." Filmmaker Aviva Kempner designs a colorful home from all angles.

This is Cafritz six years after the devastating fire that ravaged her eight-bedroom mansion on Chain Bridge Road in Northwest Washington, destroying the home she had helped design in the 1980s, when she was married to developer Conrad Cafritz. (They divorced in 1998.)

The 2009 fire consumed more than 300 pieces of African American and African art, including works by giants such as Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden, destroying one of the country's top private collections.

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Cafritz took her time rebuilding a home and reconstructing her life. She sued the D.C. Water and Sewer Authority for \$30 million after firefighters said poor water pressure hindered their ability to extinguish the blaze, settling last year for an undisclosed amount.

She viewed 100 sites in a year or so before moving into the \$3.25 million Dupont Circle condo in November 2011. Besides its prime location, Cafritz chose the space for what it had — plenty of room — and for what it didn't. There was nothing there, she says, but concrete and windows.

“It was a shell, so it had to be built out completely,” says Cafritz, who worked with Georgetown architect Calvert Bowie and designer and close friend Paul Siskin. Siskin, based in New York, first worked with Cafritz on the Chain Bridge Road house.

Wall space for art was a priority in her 4,000-plus-square-foot apartment, with its five bedrooms and 4.5 baths.



“Reality Check,” by Vanessa German is one of many pieces of social commentary in Cafritz’s collection.  
(April Greer/For The Washington Post)

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She bought her first piece of new art not long after the fire, in late 2009 or early 2010, she says. MacArthur “genius” award winner Kerry James Marshall’s drawing of a no-nonsense woman now hangs over a chair made of dominoes in a room with a black baby grand piano.

“The woman is a powerful image,” Cafritz says. “It’s an innate power as opposed to a position of power, and it’s something that I think all women have the right to possess.”

The apartment was made by joining two units. The wall space was increased by installing sliding panels against some of the walls, providing a way of changing what’s on view. Storage is located behind some panels.

“What is unusual (for a Washington high-end apartment) is the industrial aesthetic and the amount of great art,” Bowie, of Bowie Gridley Architects, wrote in an e-mail.

Some walls are plaster, some concrete, and all are painted gallery white. The floors are a polished concrete, and Cafritz left the industrial pipes exposed. She also made sure her bedroom overlooks Massachusetts Avenue.

The project, which took about four months, is a radical departure from her former home.

“I decided that I could never really go back home, so I wanted [the condo] to be completely different,” Cafritz says.

Also in *Fall Home & Design*: “The best thing since the brick.” Architect Travis Price thinks shipping containers are the next big thing in building. Not everyone agrees.

Elevator doors open into Cafritz’s entryway, immediately depositing a visitor into an ocean of art. Go right and you’re headed down an art-lined hallway that leads to the domino chair and the Marshall drawing. Go left and an expansive living room opens up, where work hangs from ceilings and sculptures rise from coffee tables. Rugs that explode with color or bask in delicately woven earth tones swim beneath your feet throughout.

Cafritz describes the furnishings — some pieces of art in themselves — as “eclectic with a mark of vintage from the ’30s to the ’50s.”

“I feel a commitment to the comfort of my guests and to the comfort of my eye,” she says. “It has to be what I like. It doesn’t have to be expensive, and it doesn’t have to be inexpensive.”

She and Siskin scoured antiques shops, looked at designers’ works and visited stores such as Restoration Hardware, where she found her living room sofa.

The living room also includes a built-in stainless-steel bench with plush, deep gray cushions that runs the length of one wall, and two overstuffed chairs from the ’40s. Across the room are circular wooden benches — old seats from a ferryboat station in Hudson, N.Y. — surrounding a Benjamin Rollins Caldwell computer-inspired coffee table, a riot of motherboard parts with a glass top.

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Cafritz's dining room table is art, too; its edges and legs drape like the delicate folds of a tablecloth. That's because "Frozen Cloth Table," by Deger Cengiz, is indeed a synthetic fiber cloth treated with an "epoxy matrix."

The railings that line the two staircases leading to the second level are stunning leaf-patterned steel panels that also run along the upstairs hallway, as if wrapping the place in an embrace.

Cafritz hired Cuban-born artist Jacqueline Maggi, who teaches at Ellington, to create the panels.

"I was working with metal and liked the combination, as something that is feminine and soft that's made in a material that's hard and sharp," Maggi says. "In some way, it would connect her to nature and feel that the hard times have passed with the fire."

Cafritz does her own curating, sometimes with the help of Maggi.

"It's an exhibition design," Maggi says. "It's always changing because it's always growing."

Cafritz has put a few pieces in the building's stairwell, and a colorful portrait of President Obama — made of cereal — hangs in the lobby. Other works are in storage, some ultimately bound for Ellington.

The bold, irreverent collection sizzles with social commentary and moments of sensuality. Artist Kristine Mays's large black wire sculpture of a hoodie is mounted at the top of the staircase. Its title: "The Entanglement of Black Men in America." Deana Lawson's print "Otisha" — a nude woman posed on a couch — hangs on the wall of the rear staircase across from works of D.C.-born artist Iona Rozeal Brown. The shower in the master bath is enclosed by clear glass save for a large silhouette of a woman taking a shower, silhouetted heads of men flowing over her instead of water. The design is by Ellington alum Stanley Squirewell. Cafritz, who has always been a fierce supporter of emerging artists, also has the work of a few other alumni, among them a sculpture of NBA players' arms by Hank Willis Thomas, who "is having a fabulous career." He also did the Obama piece in the lobby.

"It really has to clench my gut," Cafritz says of work she buys. "And it has to speak to me, and even if it's art that may have a specific message, it has to be beautiful to me."

Her style is singular, Siskin says. "When you walk through the place there's no question who lives there."

"I've gone through periods of collecting different genres of art, and I think that I found my home, a home for my passion ... in contemporary art," Cafritz says. "I think I found some political expression there. I found a reaching beyond the edges of art there. I have always had an affinity for reaching beyond the edges, in life as well as art."

That life, lived in bold strokes, has been measured by "tragedy and triumph," as Cafritz often notes. After years of rebuilding and just as she had found herself emerging from the fire's tailspin — "I try not to dwell on it, though there are times I will be looking for something and have to say, 'Oh, that was lost in the fire' " — she was hit with a wave of new loss: three deaths in eight months.

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Close friend John Payne, Ellington's principal, died in October of a heart attack; Jay Cooper (her nephew who was 34 and running for the D.C. Council) died in December, also of a heart attack; and in May, her younger brother Mario Cooper, 61, an AIDS activist, died.

In April, Cafritz, who suffers from chronic back pain, had surgery, her third. She spent weeks in a rehab facility, returning home in June to more weeks of in-home physical therapy.

"I've been sick, but I'm well now," she says, smiling. "You can tell them that."

And the balconies are waiting.

Marcia Davis is a writer and editor for the Magazine.