

Robert Mandell

THE COLOUR OF POSSIBILITY

The US ambassador's pallet gets brighter with age.

Text by **Tonya Stoneman** Photography by **Steve Eastwood**

When you walk into the Luxembourg residence of US ambassador Robert Mandell, you are immediately greeted by a Wolf Kahn canvas depicting a country pond in brilliant greens worthy of Chagall. As you pass into the greeting room, you experience the work of Hans Hofmann, Robert Motherwell, Roy Lichtenstein, Frank Stella, and others. These art works have been supplied by a US State Department initiative called "Art in Embassies". The programme curates exhibitions for embassy residences worldwide. Each ambassador is given the opportunity to select the pieces of contemporary American art that will hang in his or her residence.

For Mandell, that privilege allowed him to advance a great passion in his life—using art to connect with others and to bring people together. There is another stunning Wolf Kahn at the top of the staircase—a huge oil canvas depicting a treeline in hues of fuchsia and rose. "Wolf Kahn is a friend of mine and has been a role model for me," says Mandell. "The colours he uses are phenomenal. I've gone into the woods with him and we've painted together. It's the coolest thing. It's like playing basketball with Michael Jordan."

Although his parents are serious collectors, Mandell painted only briefly during college. About 15 years ago, he found his abandoned art supplies in his mother's garage and was inspired to pick up where he left off. "I pulled out my old brushes and easel and started to paint," he recalls. "But it was two years before I allowed anyone to see my paintings. I didn't want to be judged. I didn't want anyone to see that part of me. Then I got to a place where I didn't care anymore. I grew up. I became less concerned about what people thought and I started hanging them up and gave some of them away. And I started painting in earnest."

The ambassador is passionate about art and shares his pastime with others every chance he gets. "I remember a day with Grant Hill [the basketball player]," he says. "He and his wife came

for dinner and I thought rather than just shoot the breeze, we would paint together. At 1 a.m., he didn't want to stop painting." Aside from charming good friends, Mandell has witnessed the genuine power of art to connect people. He tells the story of two mayors: one a Democrat and the other a Republican. "They were not friends with each other, but both were friends with me. So I invited them to my home for dinner and we spent an entire evening painting together. Painting gave them common ground on a non-confrontational basis. They remain close friends to this day."

The ambassador's residence is filled with fine art, but the pictures in his dining room are particularly special. They are the work of 12 children who live in a nearby orphanage. Mandell regularly hosts the group, which spends several mornings painting with him and having lunch. He also brings his employees into his home for "enrichment groups" where he teaches them to paint. Sharing his joy with others and witnessing the results is a high priority for Mandell. His mentor Wolf Kahn once said, "I want the people looking at my work to feel a sense of all the possibilities of painting, and, through that, in life as a whole. When that happens, I feel I've accomplished something useful." The ambassador is a great apprentice. //

ART IN EMBASSIES

"The Art in Embassies programme reveals the rich history and cultural heritage of the United States and the communal experiences that we share with peoples of different countries, backgrounds and faiths, binding us closer together. Through its temporary exhibitions and permanent collections, the Art in Embassies programme intrigues, educates, and connects—playing an ambassadorial role as important as that served by traditional diplomacy."

*Hillary Rodham Clinton,
US Secretary of State*



ROBERT MANDELL
"Art has the power to connect people"