

Posted on Thu, Sep. 29, 2011

Miami art collectors launch Washington museum project

By Audra D.S. Burch



Joshua Prezant / Joshua Prezant

Don and Mera Rubell strike a pose beside Jason Rhoades' Untitled (Chandelier), 2004, at the Rubell Family Collection in Wynwood.

Nearly two decades ago, they optimistically moved into a tattered neighborhood, delivering a certain kind of promise to Wynwood through the tonic of art, real estate and hope.

Don and Mera Rubell began patronizing local artists, and planted their roots in a cavernous, 45,000-square-foot former DEA building in Wynwood on Northwest 29th Street, replacing confiscated guns and dope with contemporary works of art.

Such beauty, in this unlikely location, helped to engineer Wynwood's steady march from blighted neighborhood to vibrant art village, now a must-stop for discerning and casual art

lovers, particularly those who descend on South Florida each December for Art Basel.

Now the powerhouse couple, who have traveled the globe in search of emerging artists, are taking their art-saves-neighborhood model to an urban stretch of Washington, D.C., on the cusp of change.

Fear not. The capital's gain is not Miami's loss.

"This move will only make the art conversation bigger and more exciting. We will certainly be challenged in Washington, and that will result in a more interesting understanding of Miami," Mera Rubell said in a telephone interview from New York hours after arriving by train from D.C.

"What happens in Washington will inform what happens in Miami and what happens in Miami will inform Washington, hopefully, in the same way Basel in Switzerland informs Basel in Miami Beach."

As part of a joint venture, the couple purchased the Randall School in southwest Washington for \$6.5 million from the Corcoran Gallery of Art, which bought the former boys' school five years ago but never developed the site.

The Rubells are planning a cultural campus that will include a contemporary art museum roughly the size of Miami's Rubell Family Collection along with a residential component —

either condos or a luxury hotel — that would act as a working endowment for the museum.

The project, six blocks from the capital, is in the design phase and has received community and city approval. Other necessary approvals are pending.

The couple consider the project part of their broader mission to make art accessible to the public.

“We are so excited about opening in the company of some of the greatest museums in the world, which allows us to engage the community with art exhibits that have other, older art references around them,” Mera Rubell said. “Washington has a dynamic combination of art schools, museums, artists, critics and other disciplines such as music and theater.”

Don Rubell says the new museum — they don’t think of it as a satellite of the Rubell Family Collection but as a separate entity — will tap into the large, established base of “cultural tourists” who visit the capital and its constellation of cultural institutions.

“We are not planning on doing the same shows in both cities. That would be boring. We want to develop programming for each place,” he says. “The two are fully capable of being separate.”

The museums will pull from the Rubells’ vast private collection, which includes works from marquee names such as Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Jeff Koons along with local artists such as Jose Bedia and the late Purvis Young.

They began collecting contemporary art in the early years of their marriage in the 1960s, and have amassed a wide collection capable of supporting rotating exhibits, some of which have traveled the country.

Much of the collection is built upon discovery. The Rubells travel extensively — they recently returned from China, where they took a van to more than 40 studios — to find and support new artists. “There is definitely something interesting and compelling going on in the art world there,” Mera Rubell says.

Next week, they head to Los Angeles on a similar mission.

One of their traveling exhibits, *30 Americans*, which explores racial, sexual and historical identity in contemporary culture, was shown in Miami during the 2008 Art Basel and opens to the public Saturday at Washington’s Corcoran Gallery of Art.

A dozen or so years ago, as they visited the city’s museums and galleries, the Rubells began talking about buying a hotel in Washington.

There is history here. Steve Rubell, Don’s late younger brother, was the owner of Studio 54 and partnered with Ian Schrager on the epic purchase and makeover of the Royalton and Morgan’s in Manhattan.

Don and Mera, along with their children Jason and Jennifer, began buying and restoring hotels in the 1990s. They took on the Albion and Greenview in South Beach and later the Beach House in Bal Harbour. All three got the Rubell Treatment, which is to say they were

graciously transported from the dark ruin of retro to newly cool sensibilities of retro. (They still own the Albion; the others were sold.)

The couple fell in love with the bones of an old Best Western in a sketchy section of Washington across the street from the Randall School.

“They are hoping to do in Washington what they did in Miami, which was really an amazing transformation,” Marc Fisher, an editor at the Washington Post, said in a WLRN-Miami Herald News interview.

“I was a reporter for The Miami Herald in the 1980s and the Wynwood section was one that you barely would set foot in, and to see the way they have transformed the neighborhood in just a short number of years is quite remarkable.”

While others saw a final chapter for the Best Western, the Rubells saw rebirth. The bonus: The motel was designed in 1961 by Morris Lapidus, an old family friend and star architect who helped to shape Miami and Miami Beach. A year after Lapidus died in 2001, they purchased what would become the Skyline hotel. Years later, the neighborhood’s face began to soften, and in 2008 it became home to the Nationals Park baseball stadium.

“We were waiting to see what was going to happen to this neighborhood,” Mera Rubell says. “It is a responsible, diverse working-class and professional neighborhood. It is historical and seemed to be gentrifying, so we waited. We were always curious about what was going to happen to the school and property across the street from our hotel.”

The project is slated to be finished in 2014, but the Rubells say they plan is to stay put in South Florida.

“It is exciting to find new frontiers in life,” says Mera Rubell. “We love Miami and we will stay as long as South Florida wants us there.”