

A Family Affair

Four decades on and the Rubells are still at it

By Alfredo Triff

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Did you know that *ARTnews* magazine ranks Don and Mera Rubell among the world's top 200 art

Jonathan Postal



Don and Mera Rubell: Their art radar is always on

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[Rubell Family Collection](#)

collectors? The Rubell Family Collection is located in Miami's Wynwood neighborhood, inside a two-story, 40,000-square-foot warehouse that once served as a Drug Enforcement Administration storage facility for cocaine and cash seized from drug dealers. The collection comprises in excess of 5000 pieces, spans more than 30 years of art history, and represents such movements as Minimalism, Neo-Expressionism, Neo-Geo, Identity Politics, and New Tendencies -- a dream of an art display featuring every possible medium, including sculptures, videos, photos, paintings, and installations. You can look at and walk around the works produced by some of contemporary art's most important names, such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Maurizio Cattelan, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Peter Halley, Keith Haring, Damien Hirst, Anselm Kiefer, Jeff Koons, Paul McCarthy, Takashi Murakami, Charles Ray, David Salle, Julian Schnabel, Gregor Schneider, and Cindy Sherman, among others. The Rubells also have an impressive collection from local talents, including Hernan Bas, José Bedia, Pablo Cano, Cooper, Naomi Fisher, Mark Handforth, Bert Rodriguez, and Purvis Young.

Of course, it hasn't always been that way. The 63-year-old Brooklyn-born former gynecologist met his wife Mera in the library at Brooklyn College in 1962. The young couple married two years later and began collecting art on a monthly budget of \$25, gleaned from the modest salary Mera earned teaching at New York's first Head Start program.

After more than twenty years of accumulating art, the Rubells inherited great wealth from Don's brother, Studio 54 impresario Steve Rubell, who died of an AIDS-related illness in 1989. Their new financial status didn't change their basic approach to collecting: discovering unknown talent.

Even by the late Eighties, when the Rubells were already considered major collectors on the international art scene, their *modus operandi* was to acquire works before the artist became recognized. During an interview with Peter Schneider, Don nicely put this idea into perspective: "Some of this stuff has been bought for the price of a haircut or a pair of shoes." Which brings up an intricate aspect of collecting that many people ignore: vision.

In the early Nineties the Rubells moved to Miami. Says Mera: "We needed a change and we were tired of commuting back and forth." In retrospect, they did the right thing by purchasing what was a huge, nondescript, dilapidated warehouse in the heart of Wynwood, a sketchy area north of downtown Miami.

The famed hotelier family finances its self-proclaimed obsession using profits from its three Art Deco hotels in South Florida and a fourth in Washington, D.C. The Rubells bought the Albion in

1996 and remodeled the South Beach building at a cost of \$10 million to incorporate furnishings by architect Carlos Zapata. They also own the Greenview in South Beach as well as the Beach House Bal Harbour in North Miami Beach.

Last year the Rubells refurbished their warehouse, just in time for Art Basel 2004. Designed by Miami architect Alan Schulman, the fortress-style building was given a cool contemporary look with plenty of windows and a user-friendly interior layout. In spite of the renovations, the space can house barely five percent of their collection. At any given time, up to 200 works are on loan to museums around the world, and the rest are kept in storage. The museum also houses a formidable 27,000-volume library of art books, which is available to artists, historians, and the public for research.

The Rubell Family Collection features rotating exhibitions under the direction of Mark Coetzee, and has different educational projects for teenagers and young adults.

No doubt the Rubells substantially influenced the arts explosion in Miami during the late Nineties, culminating with Art Basel, Miami. There are other world-class art collections in this city, but none is housed or displayed with such consistency, attention to detail, and outreach programming as the Rubell Family Collection.

New Times spoke with Don and Mera Rubell about their collection.

Thanks to last year's renovation, this is perhaps the best private/public collection in Miami. You've got an aesthetic feeling to the space. What prompted this change?

Mera: Our objective was the collection -- it needed a better environment for the art, what you'd call the nuts and bolts, climate control, and lighting. We also needed a better facility for the public.

Don: Our real dedication is to the art and whatever it takes to make the art look and feel as good as possible. We owe it to these artists that the work looks its best.

M: We can only show at one time two to five percent of our collection. But the building needed to be upgraded. What is the best environment for the art to reveal itself to the viewer? That context is important, how we present ourselves to the world.

You were sort of the first to move to the block. Is that art savvy, business savvy?

M: It's necessity savvy. We came here for a real-estate opportunity initially.

D: [Interjecting] It was not. As far as Wynwood? We said, "We have to find a facility." We had looked all over Miami. We knew what we were looking for.

M: It was the building.

D: Well, it was the building and the context; they both make the right feel.

M: A personal necessity on a bunch of levels; the physicality of the building was critical. Instead of spending a lot of money and creating it, we invented an urban landscape to find what we were looking for.

D: We understood that there were wonderful people here in the neighborhood. We're from New York and feel perfectly comfortable within an urban existence.

Has it been always like this?

M: [Laughs] No, when we started, we were poor. However, you have to understand that we always spent lots of money in art. Don was a medical student and I was a schoolteacher for the first Head Start program with a \$100 per week salary.

D: We managed.

M: We figured out how to collect art; \$25 of that \$100 would go to art.

D: [Interjecting] Well, the numbers have changed, not the percentage. [Laughs]

When did this happen?

M: Nineteen sixty-four, when we got married.

How do you keep up with all the art out there? Art seems to grow everywhere. Take a look at China, an unbelievable market.

M: We are very much in touch with China. But the key is that we keep in touch with the artists.

D: We look for them. The radar is always on.

M: An endless number of studio visits. The artists make you understand that if you want to achieve certain things, you have to look at your problem in different ways.

Why Miami?

M: We had to live here. We've heard people saying, "I wouldn't visit your collection in that place," or "Before going to your place, I would not have thought of going into that location."

D: You have to make a choice to move over the threshold. We've always lived with the art. Living away from the art was like losing a connection.

M: It was the right place at the right time. You see this building? A former DEA facility, very scary, with all the paraphernalia of police activity, surveillance rooms, wires.

D: There were even bullet traces on the walls.

M: I went to this [nearby] elementary school and I sat down with the principal. I felt the school would give me an indication. There was such evidence of caring and parenting and tremendous pride in the children in this poor neighborhood.

D: I'd say that the security here is better than in North Bay [Village]. People care; this is their life. If a stranger comes here, they'd find out.

You were here through the arts explosion and in a way a part of it. How does it feel to be a catalyst?

M: It feels great, but we are also very involved with the universe of art; we have relationships with all these artists and countries.

D: I hope the neighborhood doesn't change. We don't want this to become a huge mall or condo canyon. The development needs to take that into account.

M: I'm concerned that artists will be pushed out. Purvis used to live nearby. The development may turn all this into a place that doesn't feel good for art anymore.

D: We've lived through the various urbanisms. You can buy a million-dollar condo and still not have the community that these people have around here.

On the second floor you have a serious display of new paintings. What's going on?

M: We are abreast of what's going on in artists' studios around the world. The mission of the collection is to find these movements. We don't care where it happens -- in a neighborhood in Leipzig or a slum in Beijing.

D: Painting is as unique and fresh as it was a hundred years ago.

M: We follow the moods, the trends.

Yes, but as collectors you see things and show them, and that influences curators, museums, and the media. You can incite trends with your exhibitions, and people will react.

M: Perhaps, but it would be foolish to pretend that one person can do anything all by himself. I wouldn't simplify it -- consensus is very complex.

D: See, we've shown Richard Prince; for sixteen years nobody paid attention. All of a sudden they love it. The way I see it, people are ready to see it now.

M: Perhaps you can say we were one voice among a group of people who saw it differently. It's the sum of all these voices that make it happen. But ultimately we collect what speaks to us personally.

Where are we heading in terms of art?

M: I'll tell you something. We wake up at 5:00 a.m. every day and we don't get out of bed until about 8:00 a.m., and we literally talk about art for an hour every day. It's the subject of our lives.

D: [Interjecting] Your question is very interesting. We cannot anticipate; if I did, I would make the art happen. I can't do it -- the window is really very short. There's an artist we're going to exhibit this December who is completely off the radar; there are only two or three people who have seen the work. We think it's incredible. It feels right.

M: This is what happens and this is a question we always ask.

D: We always ask the question.

M: How is it that one can be in this place that just feels right in order to deal with certain artists? For example, take Hernan Bas. Hernan is becoming an amazing artist in the world. And he was here. We started looking at his work and there you have it. You don't know.

D: I was having this discussion last night. There's so much figurative art out there right now that maybe the next thing will be abstraction, but in order to go there it needs artists who are interested in abstraction. What we want or think is irrelevant.

What's the Rubell formula?

D: I'd say, find the artists, and the art, right at the time they're ready. It's a constant process of discovery. You need to develop the eye.

M: We want to do something that makes a difference in the world.

You have a private collection that is also a public institution.

D: A lot of the art we bought remains basically as a service in the art world. It's the use as a resource for the education of art. It concerns curators, artists, critics, and teachers.

M: Museums are so organizational that the acquiring process becomes difficult. We have the ability to get these kinds of works because we make the critical decision and a financial commitment faster.

D: Perhaps we have more freedom to choose.

M: Keep in mind, we don't look for controversial work for its own sake. It must be relevant.

What's relevant?

D: There goes the philosopher. [Laughs]

M: We buy what we like, what really talks inside of our lives, those issues that are important to us as human beings.

D: I'd modify that. We buy what changes the way we look at life, not necessarily those that affirm what we already have. A lot of the works that end up being shown are the most difficult for us, because they require us to make a quantum leap from what we thought to something else.

M: Okay, so we say to you we buy what we like, right? We buy things that change the way we are. It's the same with our lives; we surround ourselves with the environment to influence and experience contemporary issues. You have to walk the walk in order to feel the talk.

D: Yes! That's inspired. [Laughter]

Some people say Miami has not been able to congeal all of these wonderful collections in one place. Will it happen?

D: Miami is 100 years old. Paris is 2000 years old. You wouldn't ask an infant to conjugate Latin verbs.

M: Miami is a work in progress. This museum you refer to will be built and will have a long-term effect in the community. The Philadelphia museum was built without a collection.

D: If you build a state-of-the-art, well-thought-out place, I'm sure there are collections that would

end up in that museum.

M: We have a public mission and we'd be very happy to collaborate with that future museum.

What about art education?

D: Our universities and art schools have to teach more than a master's [degree]. The point is: How is contemporary art relevant for the world today?

M: We have tremendous resources. We really welcome any teaching person in Miami to come here and use our facilities.