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FAIR PLAYERS

## The Collector

By DAISY GARNETT

I first encounter Mera Rubell on the telephone. “I don’t know whom I’m speaking to,” she shouts, “and I can’t hear anything you are saying because I’m in Miami at the opening of the Performing Arts Center, and there is live music on every street. It’s just amazing. Oh, my God, is it wonderful. Listen.” Halfway around the world she holds up her cellphone. I can hear some crackly noises and Rubell laughing in the background, her voice filled with joy. “Mera Rubell is great,” a Berlin art dealer e-mails me later that day. “One of the very best. She buys with her eyes and never with her ears and genuinely loves art.”

A couple of days later, I meet Mera and her husband, Don, who together with their children, Jennifer and Jason, have amassed one of the more ambitious private collections of contemporary art, at the Frieze Art Fair in London. Mera and Don, Jason and his wife, Michelle, have come directly from Heathrow (they stopped at their hotel only to dump their luggage) and will spend the next eight hours on their feet. “We like to hit the ground running,” Mera says, without any affect.

You spot many things at Frieze — Norman Rosenthal, the exhibitions secretary of London’s Royal Academy, posing on top of Jonathan Meese’s horsy-like sculpture, or Kate Moss, being, well, photographed — but it is not necessarily an environment conducive to looking at art. The problem is compounded for the Rubells because they know everybody, and so their progress around the fair is slow. “Look,” Mera says, “it’s very nice to see people. It’s part of it. You can’t get away from it.”

At some places, however, they linger deliberately. They stop to study Robb Pruitt’s paintings at Gavin Brown, Francis Alÿs’s work at David Zwirner, André Butzer at Guido Baudach, Glenn Ligon at Thomas Dane and Mai-Thu Perret at Barbara Weiss. And though they admire all these artists (they bought Perret’s whole show, “Apocalypse Ballet,” in February 2000 and later this week will buy a Ligon), they are at Frieze this year with an agenda: to make sure there isn’t anyone that they might have overlooked for “Red Eye,” a show of Los Angeles artists that will open at the Rubell Family Foundation in December, before Art Basel Miami Beach, and to see, in particular, “Whore in the Church House,” a painting they are thinking of buying by the Los Angeles artist Mark Bradford. “It’s a killer painting,” Mera says, looking at it and shaking her head in wonder, “just killer.”

Not all purchases are made swiftly. “We’d have a weak and heartless collection if we didn’t fight,” Mera says about her family’s collaborative collecting style. “You have to give up your ego when you collect by consensus, but that doesn’t mean that you don’t stand up for what you believe in. The fighting, the agreeing, the resolution, it’s all relevant. Don and I wake up every morning at 6 and talk about art for two hours.” How does she know which paintings are worth fighting for? She shrugs her shoulders. “How do you choose the person you want to have sex with? How do you know when you meet the person you want to share your life with? You just know.” Later, she is more pragmatic. “How do you know when you really want to buy a

work of art?” she asks. “Because you’re willing to pay for it with money you’ve had to earn.”

When Mera first met Don back in the '60s, he was starting medical school and she was a teacher for Head Start. Their income was \$100 a week and they spent \$25 of that on art. And though they now spend considerably more, they still work for a living, running a hotel business, and spend their money wisely; they travel economy class, for example, and have always bought work by young artists, discovering Richard Prince, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons early in their careers, before they became fashionable and, more pertinently, prohibitively expensive.

The foundation is a family collection in more ways than one; not only is each member of the family consulted before any purchase — often, literally, in a scrum in the corner of an artist’s studio — but each artwork they own also seems to inform what they go on to collect. “Red Eye” is an important show for them because it reflects the very core of the collection — among their earliest acquisitions were important pieces by Charles Ray, Mike Kelley, John Baldessari and Paul McCarthy, all Los Angeles artists. “These artists have become historical figures in our collection,” Mera says, “but to show their work alone would be a monologue. You create a dialogue by showing them with new work by young artists working in the same territory. That’s when it gets interesting.” And so at Frieze, one of the things that gives them pleasure is seeing work by younger L.A. artists — Aaron Curry, Amy Bessone, Lara Schnitger, Matthew Monahan.

Discovering artists is, after all, what the Rubells enjoy most. But really it is the work itself that keeps drawing them back. They stride around Frieze, determined to see everything, and yet keep returning to the Bradford painting — which is now officially part of their collection. “We were recently offered \$3 million for our Marlene Dumas painting ‘Miss January,’ and, yes, we had a family conference about it,” Mera says. “But really there wasn’t much of a discussion. I mean, do you sell your dog if somebody offers a good enough price for it? Do you sell your grandchildren?” She shrugs her shoulders and returns to join her family in front of the painting.

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