



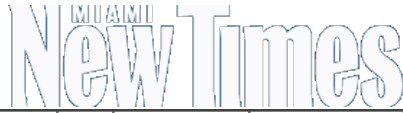

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A Family Affair

Four decades on and the Rubells are still at it

By Alfredo Triff
 Article Published Aug 25, 2005

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

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Who / What:
 Rubell Family Collection

Details:
 305-573-6090. Open Wednesday through Sunday 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., or by appointment.

Where:
 95 NW 29th St, Miami

By Jacob Bernstein



Don and Mera Rubell: Their art radar is always on

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?

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