



Collecting Contemporaries

By Monika Burman

Don Rubell says, "We do everything together."

And that's been the case since Don and Mera Rubell met in 1962. Since the '60's the Rubell's have been collecting contemporary art together. The Rubell Family Collection, housed in a spectacular warehouse-style gallery space in Miami, includes over 6000 works of art. Paintings, photography, sculpture, video and installations, this collection exemplifies the excitement of discovering art, watching it unfold, evolve and live in their own time.

Over the last three decades the Rubell's have collected works by the most remarkable artists in the world: Keith Haring, Peter Halley, Damien Hirst, David Salle, Cindy Sherman, Purvis Young, Andy Warhol, Carl Andre, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Thomas Struth, Mike Kelley, and Louise Bourgeois. Virtually all were collected early in their careers by the Rubell's with the singular vision of art appreciation in the here and now.

Don and Mera Rubell graciously spoke with MAG on a Friday afternoon, just a day after arriving home from another collecting trip.

Was there an event or a moment when you knew you wanted to be collectors?

M.R.: I think people give the title of "collector" too freely. We didn't call ourselves collectors until we had been doing it for 10 years. It's not about a particular piece.

D.R.: I think the moment might have been in Italy, when we saw Francesco Clemente. He was so radically different from what we'd seen.

M.R.: Yes, and what was amazing is that we entered the universe of the artist. We began to understand artistic commitment and we knew that we had to show that same commitment when allowed into that privileged realm.

D.R.: And I think since then we've matched every other piece we've collected to that.

What is it about contemporary art that has captivated you?

M.R.: It's exhilarating to know that you're making critical decisions inside your own time; that it's your moment and you're living it. You have to take a leap of faith collecting contemporary art, you have to trust that this moment that is captured in a work will have a lasting impact.

D.R.: There are a number of reasons in my view. No matter who you are you can never buy a great piece from the 15th or 16th century. That type of work is already in museums or the price is so prohibitive that it's impossible to buy. Plus, when you collect contemporary art you know that it deals with contemporary issues, things that are important to you right now.

M.R.: Also, we get to deal with living artists; we get to know the person behind the work. That's very important to us; to develop a relationship with the artist. It's great to collect from the very first exhibition as we've done and build a relationship over 20 or 30 years as we've been able to do with a number of artists.

What qualities do you look for in the work you collect?

D.R.: Basically it's things we're not familiar with.

M.R.: The stricter your parameters are the more restricted you are in your frame of reference. Open your eyes and jump, that's what you have to do. Just trust in the artistic integrity of the artist.

D.R.: It's really the ones that make your heart rate change, fast or slow.

M.R.: The rule is that it must break the rules.

Who are you interested in right now?

M.R.: Well, Mike Kelley. We just saw his show at the Gagosian. It was just outstanding and inspirational. We've been collecting Mike Kelley for twenty years now, but he managed to come up with something new and fresh and great.

D.R.: Also we just saw [John] Stezaker when we were in the U.K. recently. He's sixty years old and a professor at the Royal Academy. Seeing his show was just as exciting as any young artist. We were buying work from as far back as 1979 right up to the present. We just never know what we'll see.

M.R.: And that's a good point, age means nothing. A young artist doesn't necessarily mean young in age, it just means new for us.

Mark Coatzee titled his book about your collection "Not Afraid", how do you feel this applies to your collection?

M.R.: Well it has to do with making decisions, they reflect your thoughts and reflect so personally on taste, knowledge and aesthetic.

D.R.: Specifically, the "Not Afraid" is a direct reference to a [Maurizio] Catalan piece called "Elephant". But, you know, when you buy a Picasso, you know that purchase is secure, that generally-speaking it's a sound investment. With emerging artists there's conflict. It's like the Impressionists who were blasted by critics at first; they weren't successful immediately. You have to have faith in your convictions, and ignore what other people say.

The Rubell Family Collection, 95 Northwest 29th Street, Miami, Florida, www.rubellfamilycollection.com