

FAMILY

With their pioneering museum and all-for-one approach, the Rubells are the art world's game changers.
By Diane Solway
Photographs by Rineke Dijkstra

In 1981, on their regular rounds of New York's East Village galleries and alternative spaces, the collectors Mera and Don Rubell struck up a friendship with a curator they'd met at the Mudd Club, a nexus of downtown cool. His name was Keith Haring, and he organized exhibitions upstairs. One day, in passing, he mentioned he was also an artist. At the time, Don, an obstetrician, and Mera, a teacher, lived on the Upper East Side with their two kids, Jason and Jennifer. Don's brother Steve had cofounded Studio 54, the hottest disco on the planet, and artists would often refer to Don as "Steve Rubell's brother, a doctor who collects new art with his wife."

The Rubells had begun buying art in 1964, the year they married, putting aside money each week to pay for it. Their limited funds led them to focus on "talent that hadn't yet been discovered," recalls George Condo, whose work they acquired early on. They loved talking to artists, often spending hours in their studios. When they asked Haring if they could visit his, he told them he had nothing ready for them to see. But a few months later, he invited them to his first solo show, at Club 57. Struck by the markings Haring had made over iconic images of Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe, the Rubells asked to buy everything, only to learn that a guy named Jeffrey Deitch, an art adviser at Citibank, had arrived just ahead of them and snapped up a piece. Still, they took the rest, and soon Haring was introducing the couple to friends like Jean-Michel Basquiat. Haring became so close to the Rubell family that he even illustrated the invitation to Jason's bar mitzvah—a drawing of two figures vaulting up stairs to a radiating number 13. The couple supported Haring until his death from AIDS in 1990 and even hosted the artist and his parents for dinner one night. Haring wanted his family to understand that he had made it, and what better way, he thought, than to show them his work in a Manhattan townhouse owned by art collectors?

In the 30 years since the Rubells started acquiring the very latest art, much has changed. Contemporary art is a glamorous commodity, the places to find it are proliferating around the globe, and the Rubells



AFFAIR



The clan at the Rubell Family Collection in Miami, on chairs by the Chinese artist He Xiangyu, from left: Michelle, Jason, Samuel, Ella, Jennifer, Max Wyss Rubell (on lap), Merá, Stevie Kim-Rubell, Don, and Olivia. Sitings editor: Esmé René.



From the Rubell Family Collection: 1. Franz West's *Goeschi*, 2007, and *Untitled (Note With Table)*, 2008 (from left), sit atop the Rubells' dining table; 2. Kaari Upson's *Rubells*, 2014; 3. Richard Prince's *Untitled (Man's Hand With Cigarette)*, 1980; 4. Keith Haring's *Marilyn Monroe*, 1981; 5. Haring's *Elvis Presley*, 1981; 6. *Pink Nose*, 2014, by Brad Jones (Brandi Twilley and Jennifer Rubell); 7. Jason Rubell, Haring, and Don Rubell (from left) at Haring's opening at the Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, 1985; 8. Cady Noland's *This Piece Has No Title Yet*, 1989; 9. Rashid Johnson's *The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club (Thurgood)*, 2008; 10. Jason Rhoades's *Untitled (Chandelier)*, 2004; 11. Cindy Sherman's *Untitled #304*, 1994; 12. Polaroid for portraits of Mera and Don Rubell by Thomas Ruff, 1988; 13. Andy Warhol's *Portrait of Steve Rubell*, 1975; 14. Warhol's *Studio 54*, 1979; 15. Steve Rubell with Halston (center) and Liza Minnelli at Studio 54, New Year's Eve, 1977; 16. Paul McCarthy's *Cultural Gothic*, 1992-1993.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THE RUBELL FAMILY COLLECTION; RUBELL, HALSTON, AND MINNELLI: BOB GALELLA/FORMERAGE/GETTY IMAGES

"It's like they're one organism speaking out of different mouths," said the former Art Basel director Sam Keller of the Rubells.

have become major players, with their own museum. Together with Jason, 45, and Jennifer, 44, they have built the Rubell Family Collection and Contemporary Arts Foundation, which boasts some 6,800 works by 831 artists. One of the most ambitious private collections in the country, it is housed in a former Drug Enforcement Administration warehouse the Rubells bought in 1993, in the once crime-ridden Wynwood Arts District of Miami. Though they like to think of themselves as "New Yorkers in exile," as Mera put it, they are keenly associated with Art Basel Miami Beach, which they helped initiate. Their rotating exhibitions are timed to coincide with the fair's opening week in December, and their off-the-wall Basel breakfast, concocted by Jennifer, a hotelier—and-food-impresario-turned artist, is a must-attend event.

And yet, five decades on, the Rubells themselves still operate the way they always have: They work for a living, running Rubell Hotels, the family business they set up in the '90s, with Jason; they relish being the first to discover artists and drive hard bargains with galleries. And studio visits remain their priority. "Art doesn't come to you," Mera says. "You have to go to the art." When the Los Angeles-based artist Aaron Curry was away on a day the Rubells were in town in 2005, the couple was so eager to learn more about him that his gallerist, David Kordansky, got permission to break into his studio. "When I came back, I could tell that they had dug through everything," Curry recalls. "It was as if they were trying to figure out my brain, not just what I made." Soon, Curry was on a plane to Miami, and the works the Rubells commissioned from him were presented later that year in their 2006 "Red Eye" exhibition, alongside those by other emerging Los Angeles artists like Sterling Ruby and Thomas Houseago. "The defining characteristic of their collecting is how much they look and how much they've seen," says Jennifer, recalling that she hated being dragged to galleries as a kid.

Fittingly, a two-story library packed with artist monographs and catalogs connects Don and Mera's modest, sparsely furnished home to the 45,000-square-foot Rubell Family Collection. When I visited this past June, works by 28 contemporary Chinese artists occupied 26 of the 28 galleries, the result of six trips to China and 100 studio visits the family had made between 2001 and 2012. Upstairs, in its own space, was one of the few pieces that is on permanent view: Charles Ray's *Ob! Charley, Charley, Charley...*, a depiction of an orgy made up of eight life-size mannequins, all in the artist's likeness. Don, Mera, and Jason had seen the sculpture in 1992 at the international exhibition "Documenta XI," in Kassel, Germany, and couldn't get it out of their heads. Two weeks later, they asked to purchase it and learned that Ray was eager for cash to buy a sailboat. "In those days, art didn't sell at the speed it does now," Jason noted wryly. "We actually had time to think about it."

In the open-plan living area, Mera was cooking gluten-free pasta and marinara sauce with clams and Don was setting the table. The walls were bare. "This is our thinking space," she said. Mera, 71, puts you in mind of a Jewish Yoko Ono, with her spiky black hair, pink-frame sunglasses, and fondness for Panama hats and black leggings. Inspired by Andy Warhol, she often wears a wig to openings. Don, 74, is her opposite. Tall and sporty, wearing a polo shirt, black pants, and sneakers with neon laces, he has a quipster's wit and the air of someone who would prefer that you cut to the chase. A conversation with the couple is never straightforward: Ask a question, and while one answers, the other provokes a debate that can go on for some time.

"We've become more comfortable with our eccentricity," Don said at one point about their approach to collecting. "If something feels like it would be interesting, we take a shot at it. It just feels right."

"It feels more than right, Don," Mera interjected. "It feels compelling. Because it's risky, you know?"

"It's not risky," Don demurred. "No one's going to shoot us."

Recalling first glimpses of works by the artists they collect, they'll unpack exhibition highlights the way baseball fans recount historic plays. "I can't think of anybody who loves to talk about art and ask questions more than they do," says Helene Winer, whose pioneering Metro Pictures gallery introduced the couple to Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, and Robert Longo.

The Rubell Family Collection has been open to the public for 20 years, and plans for an anniversary exhibition opening at Miami Basel and dovetailing with the couple's golden wedding anniversary were still being hatched.

"We've been trying to figure out 'How do we celebrate 50 years in a way that's us?'" Mera said. "A gold bracelet wouldn't do it, and going backward is not our thing." Looking to the future, they have commissioned six rising artists to create solo shows. The lineup includes painter Lucy Dodd; sculptor and painter Will Boone; and mixed-media artist Kaari Upson, who is casting the couple's mattress in silicone; as well as market darling David Ostrowski, a painter known for his minimal compositions. The Rubells paid each artist a flat fee in advance, essentially purchasing the work sight unseen.

The idea for the solo shows was inspired by the Rubells' experiment with Oscar Murillo, whose paintings they first encountered at the 2012 Independent Art Fair in New York, in the booth of the London gallerist Stuart Shave. Everything was sold by the time they arrived, but they pressed Shave to arrange a meeting with the 26-year-old Colombian artist. "He'd stayed up working 36 hours straight so he would have paintings to show us," Mera said. They bought the lot and invited Murillo to spend the summer in Miami, using the Rubell Collection's largest gallery as a studio. During Art Basel that December, they gave him his first U.S. solo exhibition, and, in due course, he was snapped up by the mega-gallerist David Zwirner. Understandably, the Rubells feel a familial attachment toward Murillo, whose rapid ascent has already spawned a backlash. Speaking of Murillo's Zwirner debut this past May, Mera told *New York Magazine*, "We have not had a sit-down with David about Oscar. And it bugs the shit out of me. You'd think he would call us up and say, 'Who is Oscar?' We know him so well."

The visibility they give artists strengthens the Rubells' bargaining power, because their exhibitions can raise profiles and prices. Since the Rubells rarely sell works, they are not the immediate beneficiaries of artists' increasing values, but the family is sometimes criticized for the kind of bartering it does. Young artists are eager for the Rubells' imprimatur, which can put pressure on their gallerists to agree to the Rubells' requests to buy in bulk or at steeply discounted rates. "Young dealers are afraid to say no to them," a veteran said.

They now buy upward of several hundred works a year, and every Rubell knows the collection by heart. "It's like a chip in our brain," Jason said. Their hotel business supports their art habit, and, in both realms, everyone in the family is an equal partner. Jason's gregarious wife, Michelle, 42, is also part of the team; her trial by fire came on her first trip to Art Basel in Switzerland when Mera quizzed her nightly on the artists she'd seen that day. Since coming out as an artist in 2009, Jennifer, who studied fine arts at Harvard and lives in Manhattan with her two young kids, has removed herself from the buying process. Best known for her food-based installations—such as the one for the Brooklyn Museum that involved a giant piñata of Warhol's head and a baseball bat—she unveiled a series of oil paintings at the New York gallery Sargent's Daughters in October. Under the name Brad Jones (to suggest a male painting phenom), Jennifer collaborated with the artist Brandi Twilley, who painted her nude three afternoons a week for more than a year. Their resulting work explores the conversation between model and artist and the evolving record they create.

No purchase is made unless Don, Mera, and Jason all agree. "It's like they're one organism speaking out of different mouths," says former Art Basel director Sam Keller. "There are battles," attests the painter Rashid Johnson, whose first New York solo show, in 2008 at the Nicole Klagsbrun gallery, seemed to be a bust until the Rubells walked in and bought all the work. Their only stipulation was that Johnson join them for breakfast. "With them, you can't just say, 'I like this.' You have to make clear why. They collect with the idea that the artists already in the collection are going to be affected by the artists they acquire—that it's a shared home." In fact, in the lead-up to "30 Americans," their 2008 intergenerational survey of works by African-American artists, which looked at diverse perspectives on race, identity, and artistic legacy, the Rubells, Johnson recalls, engaged in soul-searching sessions with several artists to ensure they were behind the project's premise.

That she presides over such a vast collection still mystifies Mera, who insists she lacks the acquisitive gene so pronounced in her husband and son. Born in 1943 in Tashkent, then part of the Soviet Union, to Polish Jews fleeing the Nazis, Mera lived in a refugee camp in Germany, and in Israel, before arriving in Brooklyn at age 12, speaking no English. "The narrative of my