

# Case study on the rubell family art collection

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## **Introduction**

One of the outstanding collections of contemporary art is the Rubell Family Collection (RFC) which was founded in 1964 in New York City immediately after its founders Donald and Mera Rubell tied knot. Being one of the largest privately owned contemporary art collections, the RFC showcases its collections in a 45, 000 square foot warehouse owned by former Drug Enforcement Agency. The museum of RFC comprises 27 galleries, a film and lecture theatre, a research library with more than 40, 000 volumes, a media room, a gift shop, a book store and a sculpture garden. The collection which is open for public view since 1996 features work exhibitions of reputed artists of international fame like Jeff Koons, Maurizio Cattelan, David Hammons, Luc Tuymans, Gregor Schneider, Marlene Dumas, Takashi Murakami, Charles Ray, Neo Rauch, Rosemarie Trockel, Kara Walker, Cindy Sherman, and Lisa Yuskavage. Besides showcasing the artworks of well-established artists, the RFC also exhibits contemporary arts of emerging artists. At present, the RFC has more than 5, 000 works of art in its possession. This paper will discuss upon the various exhibitions held by the Rubell Family Art Collection, its mode of collecting artworks, its effort in educating public and online presence and its future.

## **The Rubell Family Art Collection and Various Exhibitions**

The Rubell Family Art Collection features contemporary artworks of the time spanning from 1960s to the present. From the time the Rubell family had started collecting arts in 1960s, it had paid special focus on featuring contemporary American artists, especially African American artists like Kerry

James Marshall, Lorna Simpson, Barkley Hendricks, David Hammons, Kara Walker, Gary Simmons and Carrie Mae Weems whose work exhibitions have influenced the Rubells to collect the arts made by African American artists extensively. Currently they have over 200 works of art made by African American artists in their possession and these arts are exhibited in 27 galleries of the Rubell Family Collection in Miami. Over a period of time the Rubell family has held exhibitions of the arts of many internationally acclaimed contemporary artists. In 2005, the RFC held an exhibition where a selection of works made by the contemporary Polish artists was featured. Some of these artists include Anna Niesterowicz, Wilhelm Sasnal, Slawomir Elsner, Rafal Bujnowski, Wawrzyniec Tokarski, Pawel Althamer, Piotr Uklanski, Anna Niesterowicz, and Artur Zmijewski.

The RFC unveils a new show every year at Art Basel Miami Beach which runs for several months through the summer drawing a lot of audience. Starting from December 2013 onwards to mid-2014, the RFC will hold an exhibition of the works of 28 Chinese artists like Chen Wei, Li Ran, Li Ming, Wang Guangle, Zhu Jinshi, Liu Wei, Li Songsong and Shang Yixin. This exhibition is the result of the Rubells' ardent dedication in collecting Chinese arts by making frequent trips to China for last 10 years. The Rubells visited about 100 studios in China in places like Hong Kong, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Xi'an and Hangzhou to collect the artworks of the 28 Chinese artists who will be featured in the exhibition. Paintings, sculptures, photographs and video installations of these Chinese artists will be showcased in the exhibitions.

Besides showcasing the artworks of contemporary artists from all over the

world, the RFC holds exhibitions based on different themes. One such theme was featured in 2009-2010 exhibition titled ' Beg Borrow and Steal'. This exhibition based on the theme of how artists get influenced by other artists in their creation of an artwork featured 260 artworks made by 74 artists of different generations. The exhibition which was inspired by the famous quote of Pablo Picasso " Good artists borrow, great artists steal" featured works of artists like John Baldessari, Ai Weiwei, Robert Gober, Jonathan Horowitz, Jenny Holzer, Jeff Koons, Zhang Huan and Adam McEwen. Another theme 'Alone Together' featured in the exhibition of 2012-2013 explored the paradox of artists' working in isolation in studios and yet integrating themselves with the greater whole of an artistic community. This exhibition put special focus on representing a community of artworks combined by the artists' passion for work.

### **Eleven Taxidermied Pigeons by Maurizio Cattelan**

The above artwork acquired by the RFC in 1999 was made by the Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan who beautifully brought out the theme of 'Alone Together'.

### **Collection of Artworks by the Rubells**

Mr Donald and Mrs Mera Rubell started their collection venture of artworks in 1960s. They made a humble beginning by keeping aside 25% of their income, a monthly budget of \$25, for the purpose of collecting arts when they embarked on their journey. It was in 1980 when they bought Francesco Clemente's Creation that proved a turning point in their business of collecting art. They inherited a hefty amount when Doland's Rubell's brother

died in 1989 leaving a sizeable fortune behind. As the property prices in New York City, where they originally started their journey of collecting art, began escalating exponentially, they moved their base to Miami and bought a dilapidated warehouse which was previously used by the Drug Enforcement Agency for stacking cocaine and cash seized from drug dealers. There are many contemporary art collectors who buy arts directly from the artists, but the Rubells make their purchase through art galleries. They have never bought any work from an already established artist. Rather they frequently visit studios around the world to discover emerging talents. However, they are quite choosy when it comes to choosing an art of work and if they don't like an art, they make excuses to run out of the studios they visit. If they like the art, they sit down and get into a long discussion with the artist.

In their choice of art, they are not fascinated by a particular genre or movement of art. Any work of art that is interesting appeals to them. Donald Rubell explains in his own words " We are always following artists - there has never been one specific type of art that we pursue, only the most interesting artists at that particular time." They look for 'freshness' in contemporary artwork. For example, when they started collecting artworks of Richard Prince, they were first attracted by " his take on the media - the repetition of images and his exploration of the effect of the media on the viewer". They rely on their instinct to buy an artwork.

The Rubells also receive donations from time to time by various artists and collectors and that has helped them expand their collection. Recently in 2011, they have received a huge donation of artworks by Boston based art collector Kenneth L. Freed whose gift encompasses 59 sculptures and 14

paper works by artists like Charles Long, Taft Green, Evan Holloway, Nicolau Vergueiro, Patrick Hill, Alice Könitz, Jeff Ono, David Ireland, Lisa Lapinski, Torbjörn Vejvi, Jason Meadows, Robert Overby, and John Williams.

## **Education at the RFC and Its Online Presence**

The Rubells are very much aware of their social responsibility. They believe that the artworks treasured in their collection belong to the public and not to their family. They have a library which contains more than 40, 000 volumes - a vital source of information for local universities. The Rubells' commitment to promote knowledge and educate public about the artworks also shows in their offering of a free audio tour in both Spanish and English in their museum. Some of the audio tours have vivid description of arts narrated by the artists themselves. These audio tours are specifically designed for a smart phone, but if the visitor doesn't carry a smart phone then a complimentary iPod is provided for the tour.

The Contemporary Arts Foundation (CAF) which was created in 1994 to expand the RFC's public mission inside the paradigm of a contemporary art museum offers an internship program, an artwork loan program and an ongoing lecture series to help exhibitions take place at museums around the world. The RFC shares a partnership program with the public schools of Miami-Dade County. Miami-Dade is the fourth largest public school district of USA with its schools suffering from high drop-out rates and low attendance. The RFC in partnership with Miami-Dade County public schools arranges for free tickets to students so that these students can not only visit the Rubell Family Collection museum but also can pay visit to other museums like the Pérez Art Museum Miami, Museum of Contemporary Art and so on.

The RFC tries to expand its interaction with public through social media. It has its presence in Facebook where it publishes regularly all the updates related to the museum and the shows. However, the RFC is yet to make a lot of efforts to engage public through social media. It can offer free tickets or tickets on discount or free tours to the museums to attract more people to the museum. It can also hold an interactive session on the platform of social media to generate interest among general public about art. Though the official webpage of the RFC showcases pictures of a lot of artworks of notable artists from all the over world and provides a good deal of information related to the shows it organizes every year, the information related to the artworks, however, are not adequately imparted online. For example, though the names of the artists whose works are exhibited in each show are listed in the website, not much information is provided online about the artists and their artworks. I believe it would be better if the RFC can furnish adequate information about the artists, the hallmark features of their artworks and why and how they make a place in the museum.

## **The Rubell Family Collection and Its Future**

I think the collection of the Rubell Family nicely fits into the larger schematics of the contemporary world because right from the very beginning of the foundation of the RFC, the main goal of the founding members was to collect contemporary arts from all over the world. Their extensive search of contemporary arts has resulted in the stock of more than 5, 000 artworks in their possession. Their selection of artworks represents every major influence in contemporary art over the last few decades. Their collection includes sculptures, paintings, drawings, installation, photographs and

videos. The artworks meticulously selected by Donald and Mera Rubell and their children Jennifer and Jason represent every of the art movements that has surfaced in recent times including minimalism, neo-geo, neo-expressionism, photography and identity politics. For example, the Life After Death collection of New Leipzig Paintings is a classic example of how the RFC touches upon the contemporary art movement. New Leipzig Paintings are inspired by the movement of figure painting. The German Democratic Republic which was dominated by social realism made an influence in these paintings in which a group of seven artists with careful selection of color, forced perspective and the use of classical gestures brought alive the social realism through figurative paintings. After the fall of Berlin Wall in 1989, these seven artists including Tim Eitel, Tilo Baumgärtel, Martin Kobe, Christoph Ruckhäberle, Neo Rauch, Matthias Weischer and David Schnell reflected upon the East German political situations in their paintings drawing figures which are mute, keeping thoughts to themselves and rarely making an eye contact.

### **Das Neue by Neo Rauch**

The Rubell Family in order to keep the fire of interest alive among audience makes sure that the artists whose exhibits are displayed in the museum never fall out of favor. They acquire new collections and view the old collections in a new context, mixing the old with the new in exhibitions. Furthermore, art is something whose value increases with time. About 30 years ago the Rubells bought a black and white photograph by Cindy Sherman at \$25. The photograph which reminds one of the Alfred Hitchcock's 'The Birds' is estimated to be \$250, 000 currently. Therefore, the



collection of arts never loses its appeal.

Moreover, the RFC tries to introduce controversial and important issues in their collection. For example, the 1992 artwork by Charles Ray titled “ Oh Charley, Charley, Charley” consisting of eight nude males made of cast-fiberglass blends egomania and homosexuality, raising a lot of eyebrows.

### **“ Oh Charley, Charley, Charley”**

The infamous and controversial artist Chris Ofili whose controversial art of Virgin Mary using elephant dung raised a heated session of debate is another artist whose artworks are treasured by the Rubell family. The collection of controversial arts and artworks by controversial artists is a reason for many art connoisseurs to admire the RFC for its courage and vision.

### **Virgin Mary by Chris Ofili**

Besides its courage and prescience, another thing that sets the RFC apart is its uniqueness in showcasing emerging talents. Even now when the RFC has become one of the largest privately owned art collections, it has not stopped its hunt of new artists. With the changing trend of the art world where there is a large crowd of collectors pursuing artists, the Rubells try to employ their instinct and best judgment to track talents and collect artworks as they have been doing for years. If they can continue with their yearly exhibition on different themes imbibing old collection with the new and religiously collect the works of art from different corners of the world, they will continue to surprise art lovers for the next few generations to come.

## Conclusion

One of the largest collections of contemporary art in the world is the Rubell Family Collection (RFC) which was founded in New York City in 1964. The Rubell Family Art Collection features contemporary artworks beginning from 1960s to the present from all over the world. From its very inception, the RFC had paid special focus on featuring contemporary American artists, especially African American artists. The RFC holds a new show every year at Art Basel Miami Beach for several months. In these shows artworks of contemporary artists of different generations and different countries are featured. Besides showcasing the artworks of contemporary artists from all over the world, the RFC also holds exhibitions based on different themes like 'Alone Together' and ' Beg Borrow and Steal'. The Rubells rely on their instinct in collecting artworks. Their budget being limited, they never purchase artworks directly from any established artist. They search for emerging talents in galleries and studios. They are also not fascinated by a particular genre or movement of art. Almost all the art movements that have surfaced in the world over the last few decades are represented in the artworks of the Rubells' collection. The Life After Death collection of New Leipzig Paintings is one such classic example. The Rubells also fulfill their social responsibility by making efforts to educate the public about arts through their offering of internship programs and free audio tours. The RFC in partnership with Miami-Dade County public schools offers free tickets to students so that these students can pay a visit to the Rubell Family Art Collection gallery. The Rubell Family in order to keep the interest of the audience alive imbibes the old collections with the new in exhibitions. They also showcase various

controversial and important issues of the time through their collections. The Rubells have a long way to go if they can keep up their endeavors to collect contemporary artworks from all over the world and mesmerize art lovers by arranging yearly exhibitions on different themes.

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