



Why enter? What do you expect to see? I'm seeing. I'm checking on what's in the world. What's left? What someone thought might interest someone else.
 – Susan Sontag, *The Volcano Lover*

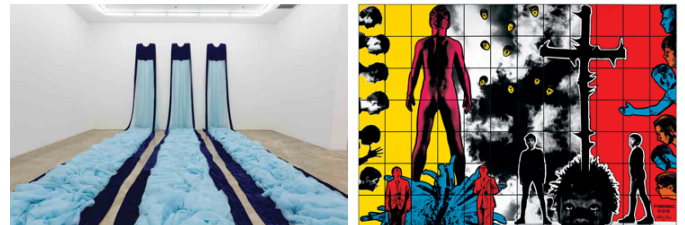
Rubell Family Collection: New Home, Same Passion

John Ewing
 1997

If you're visiting Miami, the Rubell Family Collection is nowhere near South Beach. You won't pass it on the way to Coconut Grove, either. In fact, you may have difficulty finding the collection at all. Located north of downtown in a depressed corner of the Design District, the RFC occupies a 38,000 sq. ft. concrete building formerly used by the Miami Drug Enforcement Agency to store contraband and drug-trade miscellany. This is the new home for the more than 1,000 works of art collected by New York obstetrician Don Rubell (older brother of the late hotelier and Studio 54 visionary Steve Rubell) and family. The building, and this section of the city, are easily missed in the frenzied glamour of Miami's other boom trade, tourism.

The Haitian cab driver agrees to wait until I rouse someone at the caged entrance facing NW 29th Street. A buzzer activates a loud, echoed ringing inside the building. The large metal door creaks open, and Bert Rodriguez, the RFC's young curator and sole factotum, welcomes me into the cool, quiet repository of one of the most significant views of contemporary art in the world. With minimum fuss and ceremony (a small reception desk is tucked into a stairwell), I encounter Beverly Semmes's *Blue Gowns* (1993). Like her *Yellow Pool* (1993), shown recently at Miami's Norton Museum of Art, *Blue Gowns* is a liberal cascade of organza and velvet hung

to full effect in a gallery with a twenty-one-foot ceiling, one of four large spaces on the ground level.



Left: Beverly Semmes, *Blue Gowns*, 1993; Right: Gilbert & George, *Finding God*, 1982

Space is key to such a piece. A large art work needs space to dominate, overflow, overwhelm. Likewise, Gilbert & George's *Finding God* (1982) benefits from the generous proportions of the adjoining gallery. When tipped off to the vacant DEA building, Mera Rubell reportedly exclaimed, "Okay, this is it—we can do this finally!" Developer and matriarch, Mera oversees the real estate arm of the family's stronghold with son Jason. The business currently includes office spaces and two Miami Beach hotels. Bert Rodriguez, the affable, soft-spoken curator, recounts the machinations behind the decision to move the collection to Miami. "The foremost reason was practicality. The Rubells were running out of space to store the work

and they wanted to see it. All the pieces downstairs they had never seen until they got this space, something that could never have happened in New York. To have a space this big and keep it going would have cost five times as much in New York. It happened so quickly and easily that it was like, 'Wow! I can't believe this. Let's just do it before something screws it up.'"

So far, nothing has. The RFC is a *fait accompli* and a perfect family fit. "None of the spaces interfere with the work. That's one of the problems with museums," Bert theorizes. "They hire a New Age architect to design the building and it's so constructed conceptually that it detracts from the work. Then it's not about the work anymore but about the space it's in. Here, it's the work. That's it. That's all you see."

In addition to the fifteen galleries on two levels, there is also a large storage space to accommodate much of the family's art holdings. Included are works from Jason Rubell's West Palm Beach gallery and his own collection, which he began at age fourteen with money earned from stringing tennis rackets. A nicely appointed library is located on the second floor in what was formerly the DEA's cocaine confiscation room. In contrast to the spare, no-frills galleries, the library is the busy heartbeat of the collection. It houses duplicate copies of art books from the Rubells' personal library in New York. "We're in their house pretty much right now," says Bert as we sit to talk in the library. "It's not like a museum, and they want to keep it that way."

Opening briefly for a reception after the 1996 Art Miami fair, the RFC officially opened to the public later in the year with regular hours, three days a week. The out-of-the-way location helps the Rubells maintain some of the privacy of a family collection. "It's not about the numbers—like museums have to be," Bert says. "The Rubells know they're going to be important to whoever needs them to be important. The other day a guy rode his bike all the way from Coral Gables to see the art. Those are the kind of people we want. Make it too public and it starts to be about just keeping the space running."

That responsibility falls squarely on the shoulders of the engaging 21-year-old Rodriguez. A BFA senior at the downtown New World College of Art, Bert is a thoughtful student of contemporary art and busy with his own conceptual pieces that utilize photography and sculpture. He defines himself as a "painting major who has never put brush to canvas," a confounding notion in sync with a collection heavy on Jeff Koons.

Since "it would be insane to have this kind of place and not take advantage of it," the young painting major was a frequent visitor when the RFC opened. He spent hours discussing the collection with Mark Handforth, Bert's predecessor and an artist whose Bundt pan plastic sculpture is on view at the RFC. When the position became available, Handforth and the Rubells compared notes with Amy Cappellazzo, director of Miami-Dade Community College galleries and Rodriguez's former employer. They decided to

take a chance and bring the young man onboard. Bert sees himself as just a guy in the right place at the right time.

"I'm lucky, really lucky. This isn't about smarts at all, because I don't know what the hell I'm doing," he modestly claims. With the collection in mind, we agree this might be the best point of departure. "It's also a pretty good point of view. If you don't know what you're doing, the possibilities are endless. You can see something that someone else might not see because they've got a set direction. I go to shows all the time that people have put their name on as curator and I think, I wouldn't put my name on that crap. It sure looks stupid."

This refreshing lack of pretension suits the needs of the RFC. I ask him about the dripping air conditioning unit in the largest of the downstairs spaces. "It gets fixed, and then it drips, and then it gets fixed again. That's OK. The walls are three-foot thick. It's a vault. Well, it was made for cocaine. Nobody's getting in here unless they've got dynamite. The way we see it, if someone goes to that much trouble to get one of these pieces, which are too huge to carry in the first place, then let 'em have it." Bert has developed a proprietary affection for the building, an advantage considering the demands of the job. "They've hired only me. I'm management and administration. I hang all of the work. I fix the walls, plumbing, whatever. I'm the only one responsible for this space. Throwing out the trash becomes a big deal. I've got two floors of garbage and fifteen rooms to sweep."

I wonder if this is asking too much of one person. But Bert is resolute; he understands a deeper mission. "I'm everything. Otherwise, it ends up being like a museum. You have a staff. You have to pay the staff. None of the money ever goes to the work ever again. So the Rubells are trying to keep it as much about the work as possible, which is obviously the most important thing." And the work *is* important—the collection includes early pieces by Jean-Michel Basquiat, Julian Schnabel, Yasumasa Morimura, Philip Taaffe, Francesco Clemente, David Salle, Juan Muñoz, and Keith Haring ("1980 and '81, not '85 when Haring was starting to blow up").



Charles Ray, *Oh! Charley Charley Charley*, 1992

An upstairs gallery is dedicated to Charles Ray's *Oh! Charley Charley Charley* (1992). "The Rubells had a constant thing over the phone with him," says Rodriguez. The nude figures in the orgy, all likenesses of Ray, were shipped wearing socks to protect the toes. The piece was installed as is. "They looked really good with the socks on, but we called Ray and he said, 'No, no, please taken them off.'" Bert's

particularly fond of this piece and what it reveals about the artist. “He’s such a classical sculptor, like in the Greek sense, the way he treats the work. He’s just using a modern language to do it. His stuff is representative, it’s a figure. It’s balanced, that piece especially. He treats it like a painting in space. All the figures are placed in the perfect position.” Bert is excited by the correlations. “By definition it’s got all of it, even that moment just before ecstasy. Everything is about to happen: that guy’s about to suck his toe, that guy’s about to ram him, or whatever.”



José Bedia, *Naufragios*, 1996

Another Rubell favorite is Paul McCarthy. Like José Bedia and his 1996 *Naufragios*, McCarthy has also visited the RFC to create a large-scale installation upstairs. His *Painter* (1995) is a hilarious and unnerving piece that combines a short film and the film’s set. It features a disgruntled but endearing buffoon/painter unhinged by the creation and business of art. It’s a maddening tug-of-war, equal parts complication and obfuscation. Downstairs is another McCarthy work, *Cultural Gothic* (1992–93), which Bert describes as a “kinetic sort of little theater event that happens over and over,” the type of piece that McCarthy seems to be focusing on at present. Given the number of works by this artist in the collection, I ask whether the Rubells’ frequent patronage influences the artists or their practices in any significant way.

“That really depends on the artist. McCarthy’s work seems so out there, like he would be such an insane human being and stab you with a knife if you came near him. But he’s actually the most normal, level-headed human on the planet. *Painter* is all about that relationship, those scenes where he’s being interviewed by a magazine. I don’t know if it’s cynical, exactly, but he’s definitely opinionated.”



Paul McCarthy, *Painter*, 1995; and *Cultural Gothic*, 1992–93

In a burgeoning art scene that now boasts The Wolfsonian (Mitchell Wolfson Jr.’s collection of decorative and political art from 1885 to

1945) and the soon-to-open Latin American art collection of the de la Cruzes of Key Biscayne, one wonders how the Rubells will fit into the picture. Will the family concentrate their collecting on local artists? “I don’t think Miami’s really there yet,” concedes Rodriguez. I mention Juan-Sí González, who has a studio at the South Florida Arts Center on Miami Beach’s Lincoln Road.

“He’s one of the better ones. Sí came from Cuba, did the total immigration thing with tar-painted boat. He was doing all of this crazy performance art in Cuba. Underground stuff, like in the basement of your house with a video tape of yourself. He’s one of those artists who come to Miami and go through a kind of change. They’re not sure what to do, and you see it in their work. The stuff he was doing in Cuba was political, against the system. But now that he’s here, it’s like he doesn’t exactly know what he needs to say anymore. It’s great. It’s like he’s starting over. You get to see him from scratch. I want to watch what happens with the Rubells. They’ve only been here five or six years.”

And the Rubells are certainly a volatile element. Siblings Jason and Jennifer—twenty-eight and twenty-six, respectively—opened the renovated Albion hotel on Lincoln Road in February. Future projects may include renovating additional sites around the RFC for a permanent library and artist residences. In the meantime, Don Rubell maintains his practice in New York, flying to Miami on weekends. His “family job” is cataloguing the continuous inflow of new art books, a task he happily drops to make a studio visit.

“Dr. Rubell is really into the whole conceptual, intellectual thing. Charles Ray, Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy. He loves those guys. He’s totally plugged into this, 24 hours a day. The rest of the family is busy with the hotel. They’re not anywhere near thinking about new works for the collection. But Don came in the other day, saying, “I know the next piece we’re buying.”

Arguably, the Rubells are as fascinating as the art they have committed their passion to collecting. They operate by a self-imposed set of rules: #1) No work from before 1975 will be purchased. This is when the family began in earnest to collect art and artists with whom they have an “experiential relationship.” Same rule for books in the library. “They met Basquiat really early on and got to know him,” Bert recalls, another anecdote in a seemingly endless string of exclusive personal glimpses. “Someone introduces them to an artist and they’re like, ‘alright, get out of my face. I want to talk to him now.’ They’re good about that. A lot of the artists they know really well. They stay at their homes when they’re in New York.”

Rule #2) The entire family must sign off on a piece or they don’t buy it. Bert attributes this to their rigorous dialogue. “Consider the way a Clemente and a Paul McCarthy present themselves and you ask, how did they get to those two decisions as a family? This is really about their life more than anything else. How they experience things and the objects they relate to their experiences. You’ve got this chronology, this controlled experiment through the

viewpoint of one family. It's something that could be studied. You could certainly come in here and write lots of thesis papers. But I don't give tours, and I try to stay away from big groups, because that becomes too much about me presenting the work as some divine kind of thing. It's more about what you see and not what I have to tell you about what you should be seeing."

The young curator with a world of contemporary art at his fingertips—and nearly an acre of concrete floor to sweep—strives to draw a final portrait of the Rubells that will sound neither fatuous nor fawning. "They're in this together. They don't want any distance between themselves and the art, or to be a figurehead. They're so *not* full of shit it's incredible. They've opened their private collection to the public, the doors are open, but it's really just a home."



Jason, Jennifer, Mera, and Don Rubell



Bert Rodriguez