

# The New York Times

## Miami Collectors Shake Up a D.C. Schoolhouse

The Rubells open a new contemporary art museum, extending their reach to the capital with some 200 works and a nod to Marvin Gaye.



The Rubell family — Jason, Mera and Donald — with Vaughn Spann’s “Big Black Rainbow (Smoky Eyes)” in the new Rubell Museum DC. The inaugural show, “What’s Going On,” is named for Marvin Gaye, who attended school in the original building. Credit: Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times

By Robin Pogrebin

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — Opening a new contemporary art museum as you enter your 80s in a city not known for contemporary art, when you already have a large museum in

Miami, and when cultural institutions all over the country are still recovering from a pandemic contraction, would at first seem foolhardy, if not downright reckless.

But then, the Rubells have never played it safe when it comes to collecting art.

“We’re crazy, right?” said Mera Rubell, on a recent walk through the new museum. “Do you think we’re obsessed?”

Donald, her husband, added: “We’re addicted.”

That addiction drove Mera, 79 and Donald, 82 — along with their son, Jason, 53, and their daughter Jennifer, age 52, an artist — to amass more than 7,000 artworks over the last half century, making theirs one of the largest and most important collections of contemporary art in the country.

And it propelled them through the last 15 years, while they were building their new museum in a former schoolhouse in Southwest Washington, less than a mile from the National Mall.

Walking through the 32,000-square-foot space the other day, where workers were up on ladders preparing for the public opening on Oct. 29, the Rubells’ obsessive passion was palpable. “Look at this leg hanging over here,” Mera gushed, pointing out how close a visitor could get to Kara Walker’s 2006 wax crayon drawing on paper “Panorama of Black Suffering Over and Over Again.” “This is her whole vocabulary here, and you’re right on top of it.”

That giddy excitement was apparent in the gallery that held “Shell, Glimpses,” the thickly painted abstract series that Sylvia Snowden created from 2010 to 2012, inspired by her daughter, Shell Snowden Butler. “How could you not fall in love with this painting?” Mera said, as she stood in front of one.

Whether the Rubell Museum will join the National Gallery of Art, the Hirshhorn and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture as a major destination remains to be seen.

“The greatest museums in the world are in D.C.,” Jason said. “It seems like there is a hungry audience. We can add to the ecosystem.”

Museums here say they welcome the newcomer. “They take more chances and maybe are a bit more agile than we can be, due to our federal nature,” said Kaywin Feldman, the director of the National Gallery of Art.

Melissa Chiu, director of the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, pointed out that "the audience for contemporary art in D.C. is much more expansive than people might assume," adding, "there is a whole younger community that in some ways is underserved."

Artists are also excited by the prospect of bringing more of a contemporary lens to the nation's capital, particularly in a period of so much political division. "There is an incredible legacy of art in D.C. but for the past few decades it hasn't been seen as an art town," said the artist Hank Willis Thomas, who went to high school in the city. "There is a lot of potential for engagement there."

Spending time with the Rubells is like sitting through a raucous Passover Seder with your relatives. They talk — sometimes shout — over one another. They contradict each other, correct each other, cajole each other. But they also clearly relish collecting together.

"We don't acquire anything," Mera said, "unless we all agree." (Jennifer focuses on her art and is less involved in the collection.)

First and foremost, the Rubells want the schoolhouse to feel like a neighborhood museum — the \$15 admission fee is waived for D.C. residents. (The privately owned, publicly accessible museum is open Wednesday through Sunday.)

And while they welcome the work of local artists, the Rubells will not necessarily emphasize geography. Instead, they will buy and exhibit the way they always have — following their powerful gut instincts, responding to the work that wows them. "The art is the criteria," Donald said, adding, "We don't do well with rules."

As to how they will decide which pieces get shown in D.C. and which in Miami, the Rubells said the history of the schoolhouse and the city lend themselves to politically conscious programming, such as Josh Kline's "Contagious Unemployment," a cardboard box filled with the personal belongings an employee takes upon being fired; John Miller's "A Refusal to Accept Limits" (2007), imitation gold leaf columns evoking halls of government; and Leonardo Drew's sculpture of raw cotton bales, with its historical symbolism.

"The walls kind of talk," Jason said. "We feel more of a certain gravitas — responsibility — here than we do in a Miami warehouse building."

The building, which opened in 1906 as the Cardozo Elementary School and became Randall Junior High School in 1927, was converted by the architecture firm Beyer Blinder Belle, at a cost of about \$22 million.

After plans by the now-defunct Corcoran Gallery of Art to use the former school as an educational space fell through due to the 2008 downturn, the Rubells partnered with the developers Telesis and Lowe Enterprises to create a museum and an apartment building that includes affordable housing. Lowe covered the cost of the project. (The Rubells, he a former doctor and she a teacher, fund their art purchases through their investments and only rarely sell off a work of art.)



Installation view, left to right: artworks by Gary Simmons, Leonardo Drew (sculpture of raw cotton bales) and Natalie Ball. Credit: Chi Lam

They kept the bones of the original school — the brick walls, wooden floors, arched windows. They preserved the serpentine configuration of the classrooms and refurbished the ceiling beams into tables and benches.

“We tried to leave as much of the old as possible,” Mera said.

The museum’s first exhibition, “What’s Going On,” is named for the 1971 album and song by Marvin Gaye, who was a student at Randall High.

The show features nearly 200 works from the collection, including the 1989 series of 20 ink and gouache drawings that Keith Haring said he completed in one day while listening to music by Gaye and Bob Marley.



Other works are spread throughout the galleries, include pieces by Carrie Mae Weems, Maurizio Cattelan and Christina Quarles. One room has works by four powerful female artists in dialogue with one another: Mickalene Thomas, Cecily Brown, Marlene Dumas and Lisa Yuskavage.

Last month Caitlin Berry, formerly the director of the Cody Gallery at Marymount University in Arlington, Va., was named the museum's director. "We needed someone who was hands on," Mera said. Juan Roselione-Valadez, the longtime director of the Miami museum, will also be very involved.

Although most closely associated with Miami — where they opened the Rubell Family Collection in Wynwood in 1993, and moved to Allapattah in 2019 — the Rubells also have a longstanding connection to Washington.

In 2002, they bought the Capitol Skyline Hotel, a block from the museum on I Street. Mera has been involved with the Washington Project for the Arts, a nonprofit organization that supports artists in the D.C. area.

They started their touring exhibition, "30 Americans" — featuring work by Black artists — in Washington, at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 2011. The show continues to travel (it is currently at the New Britain Museum of American Art in Connecticut through October).

Still, the idea of opening a contemporary art museum in Washington, which is typically associated with historic museums, did not make immediate sense. "If you said to someone, 'Where are you going to build a new museum?,' it would not have been in Southwest Washington, D.C.," said Arnold L. Lehman, the former director of the Brooklyn Museum, who is now at Phillips auction house. "It's unbelievably important for that community — it's great for Washington."

The Rubells say they have always been drawn to a challenge. "The mountain was there," Mera said.

They also cared about contributing to the area's revitalization, having seen the old school as a homeless shelter, a building that was falling apart, a symbol of a neighborhood in which almost everything was torn down.

The space allows for the intimacy of images like Karon Davis's bandaged plaster bust "Jasmin 1" opposite her husband Noah Davis's forlorn canvas, "Seven Prisoners of the Abyss." There is room for the sweep of paintings like Kehinde Wiley's 2008 "Sleep" — based on Jean Bernard Restout's circa 1771 painting of the same name — which hangs in the first main room, the school's former auditorium.

The Haring series, “Untitled (Against All Odds),” has a particularly strong meaning for the Rubells. They were close to Haring and have long collected his work. The museum installation is in memory of Don’s brother, Steve Rubell, an owner of the New York disco Studio 54, who died of AIDS complications at 45. “That’s the stars lining up,” Jason said.



The Rubell family with Kehinde Wiley’s monumental “Sleep,” based on Jean Bernard Restout’s circa 1771 painting of the same name, in the school’s former auditorium. Credit: Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times

While the Rubells are regulars in the auction room at major night sales, they typically don’t raise their paddles, having long been defined by buying artists early in their careers. They helped create the careers of artists now part of the pantheon, including Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Cindy Sherman and Elizabeth Peyton. They have a large cache of Purvis Young and Hank Willis Thomas.

“They’re really pioneers,” said Marc Porter, the chairman of Christie’s Americas. “They’re not the people who came in 15 years after an artists’s reputation was established.”

At the same time, the Rubells acknowledge that they are neophytes when it comes to Washington’s art world, and will have to learn a new landscape. “We don’t understand the audience here yet,” Donald said. “We’ll figure it out.”

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**Rubell Museum DC**

Opening Oct. 29, 65 I Street SW, Washington, D.C., 202-964-8254; [dc.rubellmuseum.org](http://dc.rubellmuseum.org).