



The art collectors Mera and Donald Rubell opened an exhibition space in a Miami warehouse, above, to show off their collection (Barbara P. Fernandez for The New York Times)

When private collectors go public

By Carol Kino

Published: February 16, 2007

Three years ago Mickey Cartin, one of Connecticut's biggest Contemporary Art collectors, began feeling dissatisfied. For years he had been a trustee at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, his hometown, and had given money to other museums. But he had grown frustrated with "the general inefficiencies" he perceived, from conflicts among trustees to a tendency to make creative decisions by committee.

"It was becoming more and more difficult for me to see how gifts that I was making were being used," he said in an interview.

Then one day in 2004, Steven Holmes, the curator for Cartin's collection, happened upon an empty storefront just down the street from the museum. Three months and a \$25,000 renovation later, Cartin had his own 4,000-square-foot, or 372-meter, exhibition space, where for a year and a half he mounted shows of work from his own collection, which ranges from coolly contemporary masters like Josef Albers and Agnes Martin to obsessive outsiders like Adolf Wölfli and Joe Coleman.

"I got a big kick out of doing this," Cartin said. "It got a lot of people in our town talking." He has since vacated the space, but he continues to organize shows focused around artists he collects

and admires, like a retrospective of Coleman's work that opened at the Jack Tilton Gallery in New York last September and is now at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. While he continues to donate money to museums, he wrote in an e-mail message, he is now "much more inclined" to support specific projects than the general needs of entire institutions.

Cartin is not alone. In recent years, a growing number of private collectors have been opening all manner of exhibition sites — from casual warehouse spaces to full-fledged museums — to show off their holdings and assert their aesthetic views, often subsidized by enviable tax benefits.

The trend has been hastened by an enormous flow of disposable income and an insatiable public interest in art. And then there are the practical considerations: given that so many artists are now working on an outsize scale — room-size installations or attention-demanding video art — even a mansion doesn't really cut it as an exhibition space.

Art-world savants like to point out that the United States has a long history of privately founded institutions, including colossuses like the Frick Collection in New York and the Barnes Foundation in Merion, Pennsylvania. But not all are enthralled by the current explosion.

"The growth of these spaces has impacted tremendously upon public institutions," said Roland Augustine, president of the Art Dealers Association of America and a New York dealer. Because galleries and artists generally prefer to sell to museums, he explained, a collector who finds one may gain an advantage.

It seems highly unlikely that in a century's time big institutions presenting a broad art-historical narrative will be eclipsed by small, idiosyncratic museums focused around a single collector's taste. But for the moment, this new crop of exhibition spaces suggests a power shift within the art world — one that is leveling the playing field between collectors and museum professionals, driving up art prices and allowing wealthy private citizens an ever greater say in terms of how their gifts will be used.

Not all of those citizens are forthcoming about their long-term intentions. In September the industrialist Mitchell Rales opened the semiprivate Glenstone Museum alongside his home in Potomac, Maryland, where he shows works by artists including de Kooning, Warhol, Pollock and Matisse in a Gwathmey Siegel building. Though Rales is believed to have a long-term public institution in mind, he has released virtually no information about his plans, and no one from his organization was willing to speak for attribution about the broad outlines — something hard to imagine from the director of a new public art institution.

Early next year the Los Angeles County Museum of Art plans to open a museum-within-a-museum — a project largely financed and named for the billionaire collector Eli Broad that will integrate art from his vast collection and the holdings of his nonprofit art foundation with the museum's collection in a new building designed by Renzo Piano. The project seems to give a collector extraordinary leverage over a civic institution, especially in view of Broad's current refusal to say whether his art will ultimately go to the Los Angeles museum.

Also in a class by itself is Crystal Bridges, a new museum of American art for which Alice Walton, the Wal-Mart heiress, has been snapping up masterworks. Plans call for it to open in the fall of 2009 in Bentonville, Arkansas.

Constructing what is, in effect, a museum to one's own taste may strike some as a vainglorious hobby. And those involved allow that seeing your beloved possessions enshrined this way is indeed good for the ego.

"Art collecting becomes an expression of self," said Allan Schwartzman, an art adviser who helped create the Rachofsky House in Dallas, a Richard Meier design for the collectors Howard and Cindy Rachofsky; and the Inhotim Center for Contemporary Art, a Shangri-La nestled in a Brazilian forest, for the mining magnate Bernardo Paz. "It's a form of self-portraiture."

Among the most visible is the Rubell Family Collection, started by Mera and Donald Rubell, prominent Miami collectors of post-1980s art. Frustrated by the inability to see their collection all in one place, they moved it to a former Drug Enforcement Administration warehouse in Miami a decade ago.

Rubell said the gallery, along with its educational programs and library, is run by a nonprofit foundation whose purpose is to further exhibitions of the collection. The works themselves are owned by the Rubells. "It gives us a lot of freedom in terms of acquisitions," she said.

Most collectors who create exhibition spaces are likely to take a similar tack, said Andrew Grumet, an associate with the New York law firm Herrick, Feinstein who specializes in tax issues, wealth planning and nonprofits. The collector can write off the foundation's operating costs; if the foundation also owns the collection, any artwork it buys or sells is generally exempt from sales and capital gains taxes.

Those who retain private ownership of the artwork, like the Rubells, may still be able to win tax-exempt status if they make a strong case that the foundation does more than just promote the art's market value. Which may be one reason so many of those foundations promote educational and art loan programs.

Tom Eccles, the director of the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, is now something of an expert on private collectors' spaces, having recently opened a museum at Bard that was financed by the collector Marieluise Hessel and shows works from her collection.

In some cases, he says, private collectors have put works out of reach of civic institutions. But the bigger issue for museums, he and others contend, is price inflation, which is easily fanned by collectors who covet works for their museums and can acquire without committee approval.

Eccles observed that today, "collectors feel they can contribute to the art world just like curators can, and they want to be players." For museums, that can be a double-edged sword.

For today's museum directors, courting donors therefore involves a delicate dance. "A kind of entrepreneurial side of some philanthropy has emerged, I think because of the nature of how a number of people have made their fortunes," said Glenn Lowry, director of the Museum of Modern Art.

Michael Govan, who took over last year as director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, agrees. "You'll find a lot of people who don't even want to use the word philanthropy," he said. "They want to use a word like 'investment.'"

In the meantime, Lowry said, "It's a fascinating moment." In general, "I think it's incumbent upon the institution to demonstrate its capacity to meet expectations."

He added, "But I also think a gift is a gift."