



Eugenio Re Rebaudengo, far left, with collectors Mera and Don Rubell at the Brussels Artuner pop-up, showing new works by Paul Kneale, including sculpture *Space Junk vii*, 2018, far left. Below: *Duplicate Essence*, ink on canvas, 2018, by Paul Kneale

## FINDERS KEEPERS

# south london artists

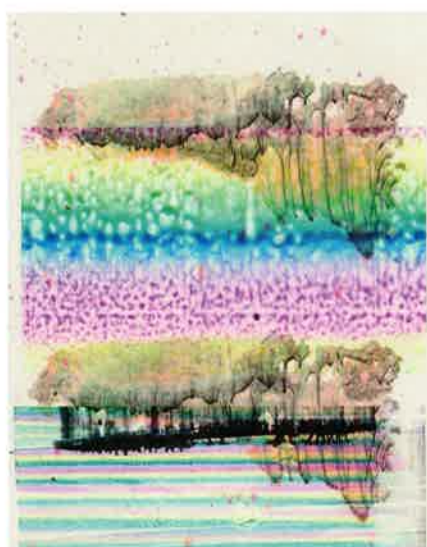
Miami's power collecting couple are exploring new avenues of art with a maverick insider. Francesca Gavin reports. Portrait by Léa Crespi

**H**usband and wife Don and Mera Rubell are acknowledged art royalty. With over 50 years of collecting under their belt, they have supported generation-defining artists at key moments early in their careers, such as Jeff Koons, Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Where the Rubells go, everyone else is quick to follow. When they first started collecting, Don worked as a doctor, while Mera was a teacher. They began their collection soon after marrying in 1964, always starting with studio visits and personal conversations with artists before investing their weekly budget of \$25.

After the death in 1989 of Don's brother, Steve Rubell – co-founder of iconic 1970s nightclub Studio 54 and

also with Ian Schrager, of Morgans Hotel Group – the couple inherited his interests and later launched their own successful hotel group with a number of properties in their home town of Miami. As their business prospects grew, so did their art collection – the publicly accessible Rubell Family Collection (RFC) now comprises over 7,000 works and is housed in a 3,750sq m space. The couple was also instrumental in setting up the Miami outpost of Art Basel and is generally agreed to have had a huge influence on the transformation of the city's art scene.

The Rubells have never been afraid to trust their instincts and invest in younger names. Mera describes this search for the new as “a bug”, an addictive “thrill of knowing something



before there are reviews, before there are incentives”. The couple's quest has recently brought them to south London. “There's something very powerful in going into a new neighbourhood,” says Mera. “Art feels good when it's part of a reinvention, a revitalisation. We are very, very excited.”

They began working with London-based Eugenio Re Rebaudengo, the founder of digital art platform Artuner, after visiting his Studioscape project in 2015. This “exhibition” took collectors into the studios of five south London-based emerging artists; all were five minutes away from each other by car. Re Rebaudengo wanted to bring the works to life through the studio-visit experience, aware that while major

Clockwise from top: *Space Junk iii*, 2018, by Paul Kneale in steel, aluminium, neon and argon gas. *Guerriero Romantico*, 2015, by Charlotte Develter in acrylic, chalk, spray paint and lacquer on canvas. *Sfumato TTYL*, 2018, by Paul Kneale in ink on canvas



collectors are happy to travel internationally to fairs in Hong Kong, New York and London, ironically an area outside of a city centre, such as London's Bermondsey, can be seen to be too far to travel. "If you see a work in a fair by someone you don't know, how can you really understand the work?" asks Re Rebaudengo. "[Don and Mera] try to understand the artists in their studios. It's the most rewarding way to collect contemporary art. It's quite rare now – too many people are looking with their ears rather than with their eyes."

The five artists were linked not only by studio location but also by their innovative approach to painting and sculpture, with a focus on materiality and tactility. There were Frank Ammerlaan's iridescent oil-slick canvases, Isabel Yellin's two-tone PVC wall sculptures and Stefania Batoeva's graphic figurative canvases. The Rubells purchased two large, vibrant, digitally inspired paintings by Charlotte Develter (prices around £10,000; *Guerriero Romantico*, 2015, pictured above far right), made from layers of acrylic, spray paint and lacquer. They also spent three or four hours with Canadian-born artist Paul Kneale (works on paper start at £1,200; paintings from £10,000) and bought a large body of his work,



made almost solely with the use of a digital scanner. They have since visited an Artuner pop-up in Brussels and purchased some of Kneale's recent installation work from his 2018 *Event Horizon* series – including *Space Junk iii* (pictured top), a piece in aluminium, steel, neon and argon gas – as well as further works on canvas (examples pictured above and on previous page).

The relationship between the Rubells and Re Rebaudengo feels much more like that of family than a traditional



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adviser/collector setup. Re Rebaudengo is the son of Patrizia Re Rebaudengo, now considered one of Italy's most impressive contemporary collectors and the founder of the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Turin. Patrizia has known the Rubells through collecting circles for a long time, and her son has known them all his life. What the Rubells and Eugenio keenly share is an enthusiasm for helping to move forward the careers of up-and-coming artists. The Rubells were early supporters of American conceptual artist Rashid Johnson, for example, who they exhibited in their 2008 *30 Americans* show (Johnson has since sold at Sotheby's for c\$160,000), as well as other now-established names such as British sculptor Thomas Houseago and Colombian painter Oscar Murillo. Equally, some of the artists that Re Rebaudengo has championed have gone on to be represented by galleries with global clout: Kenyan painter Michael Armitage has been taken on by White Cube, and late-blooming 83-year-old painter Rose Wylie is now on David Zwirner's roster.

Since setting up Artuner in 2013, Re Rebaudengo has held pop-up exhibitions in Paris, Turin, Berlin and London, as well as regular online-only shows. He works with artists almost as a manager rather than a traditional gallerist.

He works with collectors, but does not describe himself as an adviser in the traditional sense, instead exploring and developing ways of engaging with the art market. He says his aim is to create a sustainable model of how to show and sell art. "He's inventing a new paradigm in the art world," says Don. "It's not a gallery and he's not an adviser. What he's doing is managing these young people's careers, which is an absolute necessity today."

Don and Mera, meanwhile, are in the process of expanding with

a new Miami museum in a former food-distribution warehouse, which is more than double the size of their current space, scheduled to open in December 2019. It will showcase a permanent collection alongside changing exhibitions of the works of emerging artists. It is this kind of enthusiasm for the next generation that makes their collection so special. "It's not just about buying art, collecting art," says Mera. "It's really a way of life and a way of thinking about the world. It's part of our life. It's a part of us." ♦  
Artuner, 020-7265 1480; [artuner.com](http://artuner.com). Rubell Family Collection, 95 NW 29 Street, Miami, FL 33127 (+1305-5736090; [rfc.museum](http://rfc.museum)).