



by Angelo Madrigale

NEW YORK, NY --

To call artist Richard Hambleton mercurial would be a grand understatement.

Having passed away at age 65 just this past October, Hambleton leaves behind a legacy of important work that would come to set the foundation for what we now call Street Art, though his personal life was sadly marred with addiction and disease. Hailing from Vancouver, Hambleton made a stop in San Francisco before finally settling into the Lower East Side in 1979. What he brought with him to New York was the beginning of a monumental body of work that was confrontational, challenging, and for many, overwhelmingly fascinating, with a practice that encompassed illegal public art as well as a more traditional studio output.

Richard Hambleton's early public work included a series called Image Mass Murder, which was a series of terrifying (but of course staged) crime scenes – painted chalk outlines of bodies, with splashes of red paint added for an even more lurid effect. Hambleton doubled down on these art pranks with fake wanted posters furthering the backstory of these fictional forensic scenes. These vignettes popped up in cities Richard traveled to across the United States, like the calling cards of a demented Johnny Appleseed.

His early years in New York brought about his famed Shadowman series, which became his best-known work. Akin to the Image Mass Murder series, Hambleton's Shadowmen were life-sized inky black abstract figures, placed strategically throughout downtown New York. Photographer Hank O' Neal deftly described them as "silhouettes of a nuclear blast," the figures were imposing and often frightening, lurking in alleyways, and even confusing cabbies on the Bowery, mistakenly thinking their splattered outstretched arms might be hailing a ride. Many coming out of CBGBs and other late-night haunts found themselves victims of the jump-scaries Richard's foreboding Shadowmen caused. Hambleton's need to create these figures en masse shared a compulsion with the growing graffiti scene coming out of the Bronx and other boroughs, which led to friendships with pioneering graffiti artists such as Chris "Daze" Ellis, who rented a studio space from Richard from 1983-1988. Richard created 450 or more Shadowmen in the streets of New York, and produced many more from his studio long after he ended his run of placing the figures in public.

Hambleton's notorious artwork tapped into the zeitgeist of the hard-scrabble downtown scene of 1980s New York, and for a time he was outselling his peers Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Ever an uncompromising figure, Richard refused, however, to participate in the fine art market to

the level many of the other young LES art stars did, rejecting the offers of major galleries as well as turning down Warhol's multiple requests to sit for what would have no doubt been an iconic portrait. As Richard moved away for a time from the Shadowmen and began, among other projects, his Beautiful Paintings series, he also continued down a path of self-destruction with a devastating addiction to heroin, which would sadly haunt him for much of the rest of his life. By the 1990s, with the fine art world that had at one time clamored for his participation now having moved on, Richard was forgotten by many. His addiction led him to dark places, periodically trading artwork for food and rent, struggling to survive after many of his art world peers had passed away from similar addictions as well as the AIDS crisis that consumed so many bright young talents.

Taken in by gallerists John and Kristine Woodward of the Woodward Gallery (their first solo exhibition of his work was staged in 2007), Richard finally had the benefactors he needed to survive and create. Hambleton was, however, his own worst enemy, bouncing from hotel to hotel, leaving destruction and massive repair bills in his wake during his years with the Woodwards. Even with a successful 2009 show co-produced by renowned fashion designer Giorgio Armani, Richard was unable to conquer his demons and find any sort of true consistency. Richard's addiction was now coupled with scoliosis, as well as a devastating form of cancer that began to consume much of his face, leading him to cover his mouth and nose with scarves and surgical masks when venturing into the public.

While I personally loved (and continue to love) his work, I was far too timid to do much more than admire him from afar – encountering him at random openings, but never gaining the courage to speak with him more than the briefest of greetings. My fears were seemingly unfounded, as almost everyone who personally knew Richard claimed that through it all, he remained a graceful and warm person.

In his final year, Richard began working with Brian Kelly and wife Heather-Spore Kelly who endeavored to keep him sober and focused. The Kellys produced his final solo show, which Richard attended, an exhibition of his 2016-17 work, shown during the TriBeCa Film Festival. After decades of notoriety coupled with a body of work deemed crucially influential to a younger generation of Street Artists like Faile, Blek le Rat and Banksy, prospects for Richard were finally on an incredible upswing. A full-length documentary film by Oren Jacoby entitled Shadowman debuted with much acclaim at the TriBeCa Film Festival in 2017. Next, a major early canvas of Richard's was featured in the excellent Club 57 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, just days before his passing.

Though his life was sadly troubled and marred with tragedy, in looking back, there may be no artist that better personifies the raw, uncompromising attitude of New York's downtown in the 1980s than Richard Hambleton. In death he has hopefully found the peace that addiction stole from him in life, and I personally hope his soul can now truly rest, knowing his artwork continues to receive the recognition it greatly deserves.

Post-War & Contemporary Art
Auction: May 9, 2018 at 2pm
Exhibition on view May 5 - 8

The auction of Post-War & Contemporary Art offers two works by Richard Hambleton.
[View lots 85 and 86](#)

