







Photo: Hank O'Neal



# RICHARD HAMBLETON

SHADOW MAN COMES INTO THE LIGHT



Words: Valerie Gladstone :: images: Courtesy of Woodward Gallery, NYC

Art lovers will count themselves very lucky if the famed and elusive artist Richard Hambleton makes an appearance at the highly anticipated "Art in the Streets" exhibition at the Los Angeles MOCA, which takes place through August 8th. Nor does it seem any more likely that Hambleton will attend the show when it travels closer to his New York home, the Brooklyn Museum, in 2012. Curated by director Jeffrey Deitch, it features Franc Palaia's photographs of his haunting shadow figures from the '80s, among his works that are now fetching real

money at auctions around the world.

But on the opening night of Richard Hambleton's show, "The Beautiful Paintings" at the Woodward Gallery in 2007, the crowd was offered the rare pleasure of his presence. Mr. Hambleton exhibited sporadically at galleries and museums over the past twenty-five years, but nothing up until then equaled the power and number of works gracing those walls. It was his first solo exhibition in ten years, and the people spilling out on to Eldridge Street could talk about nothing else.

Aptly called beautiful, the paintings depicted wild, explosive, simmering and seductive nature, in luscious reds and oranges, steely, electric blues, luminous yellows and earthy greens, painted on wood, metal or mirrors. Almost as remarkable as the works was the fact that the famously reclusive Mr. Hambleton was still alive and capable of painting them.

"Is that Hambleton?!" was the question of the evening, as people turned to get a look at the debonair, delicate, then 53-year old painter. Young artists

hovered around him like a hero, eager to hear how in the '80s he peopled the walls of downtown and later the world's cities with his menacing shadow figures and fallen bodies silhouettes. In 1989, he even painted his shadow men on the Berlin Wall in Germany. "That work had to be done outside," he said. "It was a gift to the public. I wanted to combine site-specific earthwork and classic painting techniques. But all the time, I also painted like this. They're not seascapes, rainscapes, or landscapes - they are escapes." Some critics immediately understood





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the connection between Mr. Hambleton's street figures and art on canvas. "The looming violence in Hambleton's earlier work is still present," wrote Michael Brenson, "But now it has taken on an almost apocalyptic form. He is another contemporary artist whose work seems intent on changing the way we look at the heroic abstract paintings of the 1950's and 60's. In his waterscapes, it is as if the color zones of Newman had suddenly opened up to show us not the harmony and infinity of nature but a world on the verge of chaos and destruction."

That chaos and destruction wasn't only on his canvases, hence the constant rumors of his death. His party buddies throughout the '80s, fellow street artists Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, died long ago from substance abuse, and though he survived, his addictions took their toll. Physically ill for over a decade, he lived at the Chelsea Hotel, other places and sometimes in the street throughout the '90's, without owning a permanent address.

"The party was over," Mr. Woodward said, "and Richard went forward into the future alone. The 90's were a period of huge adjustment and self-representation. He became a mature artist after much loss. He moved away from the hyped gallery experience. It was a very prolific period where he used his art as currency to survive."

Only the persistence of the Woodwards, long time admirers of his work, brought

him back into the light, providing Hambleton with needed surgery and a new studio. "Kristine and John are taking care of things for me," he said a few days after the opening in 2007, walking into the gallery with a portfolio of articles and sketches under his arm. "They've made it possible to continue. I use every last bit of energy in my paintings."

Then came "Richard Hambleton New York" sponsored by Giorgio Armani in 2009, a huge exhibition organized by curators Andy Valmorbidia and Vladimer Restoin-Roitfeld featuring paintings from the artist's personal and Woodward Gallery's own collection. Impressive major exhibitions of Hambleton's Shadowmen, Horse & Riders, and Beautiful Paintings followed in Milan, Cannes, Moscow and London with a new cache of collectors taking notice. Life size photographs by Hank O'Neal of Richard Hambleton's shadowy silhouettes on Lower East Side streets from 1981-1982 exhibited in homage to the power, the actual paintings once held when Hambleton placed them on the darkest corners of city street walls.

An artist from childhood, Mr. Hambleton grew up in Vancouver and studied at the local art schools. Immediately drawn to public art, he joined a group of local artists who engaged in performance art. "I wanted to be a painter," he said, "but conceptual art was then the thing." Eventually he left Canada for New York with his girlfriend at the time, artist Jenny Holzer. By the late 70s, he had already made a name for himself, by deciding





Photo: Franc Palaia



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to stage murder scenes, painting the chalk outlines police usually draw around the bodies of murder victims.

"I'd go out with friends," he said, "in the middle of the night. They'd carry my paint and I'd look for a good spot and then have them lie in suitable positions and locales. I'd paint their outlines on the pavement. After they had gotten up, I'd splash some very realistic looking blood, matching the area in which I figured that they had been stabbed or shot. I'd have to work fast. My theory was that the city is not a blank canvas. It's a picture - a motion picture containing sociological and psychological elements. My urban work was added to and became a part of the picture. After awhile I created a persona."

A very famous one at that. He gained notoriety even outside the art world. In fact, he could have qualified as a psychic terrorist, by increasing the anxiety levels of urban dwellers. "Life" and "People" magazines picked up on him and ran extensive stories on his activities. He also knew how to coach his friends into realizing their potential as artists and writers. Nonetheless, he was broke. "Other people made tons of money then," he said, "Keith, Basquiat. I should have been more aggressive. I was kind of shy. Actually, the only thing I want money for is good food - I love good food and it's expensive."

Shyness and illness did not prevent Mr. Hambleton from producing in the ensuing decades though. "I work all the time," he said, taking a few moments to look at the paintings on the walls of the gallery. "Paint goes everywhere.

Everything is dripping with paint in my studio. And wet too. I use a lot of water. I don't use regular art supplies. I put ten brushes together. I have to shave off half the hairs to make them thin enough. I also use straws and toothpicks. I pick up the canvases and tip them around to make the paint run."

Stopping in front of a large gold canvas on that opening night in 2007, he said, "The accidental shapes are really, really important. And getting the light right. I use bright transparent paint so the light will bounce off the canvas. And I used gold powder. I loved it when I walked into Woodward Gallery the first time after they'd been hung. Everything gleams. My next show will be called The Sublime Paintings. I want to capture life and light - that's what the sublime is all about, painting with love."

The once nameless artist known only as The Shadowman remains as elusive as ever. He makes brief appearances, at best, these days stepping out into the light only to meet his most basic of needs. Yet the public has increasingly become aware of his growing fame and stories past through the successful exhibitions, wide media coverage, worldwide receptions and auctions, and current press on the glamorous Valmorbida-Restoin-Roitfeld/Armani sponsored events. The Woodward, ardent believes in his genius, will make sure he never entirely slips back into the shadows, giving him the support to continue his work in his studio. He may not attend most of his exhibitions but he is making sure the public will at least see what he most cares about - his art.







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