



JMR's (James Rizzi) work at the Four Seasons. From L to R: The Blue We Bathe In, Little Ninja, Sanctuary

KNOCK ON WOODWARD

By Rory Winston

Replete in niche galleries whose names sound like Indie bands - i.e.: the Lodge, Con Artist Collective, Ramiken Crucible, On Stellar Rays - the Lower East Side is in the throes of an artistic Renaissance, a resurgence as vibrant as in the days of Warhol, de Kooning and Lichtenstein. To be fair, the scene was bleaker prior to the advent of the New Museum in 1997. At the time, few would have dared move from pedigreed areas such as Soho to the Bowery and beyond. Woodward Gallery was the exception.

Preceding the prestigious contemporary museum, the Woodward Gallery moved from its Soho location - where it had been for 13 consecutive years - to the very spot on Eldridge Street where the two-floor establishment still stands. Since that time, at least 150 galleries have sprouted here. Of course, the owner's desire to curate dates back even earlier. The Woodward couple began their first showings in their own small Gramercy Park apartment. Admittedly, neither John nor Kristine knew anything about the business in those days. John Woodward was a chef by trade and an artist by education; while Kristine, who had studied medicine, had a fearless abandon when in tune to pursuing anything she felt passionate enough about. Like the beginning of many a 'bildungsroman,' their story started with a desire to change the world: the young heroes would eradicate the pretentiousness in the field of art and create an inviting space in which to nurture artists,



educate the public, and empower prospective art lovers. Their history doesn't disappoint.

Looking at how the couple helped Richard Hambleton is enough to convince even the most skeptical of their steadfast resolve in nurturing talent. It wasn't long ago when Hambleton was an all but

forgotten name by the very circles now celebrating him. Unlike Frank Shepard Fairey and Banksy, by 2005, Hambleton was near destitute, on drugs and selling paintings on a one-off basis just to get by. The renewed interest in him is in no small part due to a sustained intervention by the Woodward duo. Championing his cause prior to any sponsorship, the Woodwards footed his hospital bills, delivered him food on a daily basis, meticulously planned his comeback, and helped bring in the photographer who would capture decades of his material that would otherwise have been lost. That the Shadowman has successfully been resurrected is a feat astonishing enough to have piqued the interest of Oscar nominated director Oren Jacoby who sees Hambleton's journey as a great subject for a documentary.

Celebrating their 20th anniversary, the Woodward Gallery recently held a retrospective that designated an outdoor public wall for use by Street Artists. The exhibition included murals by very renowned participants. As for the gallery's Fall Season, it opened with James Rizzi - aka JMR - a perfect choice for articulating the ongoing dialogue between street art and exhibited works. Concurrent with the Woodward show, works by JMR are being shown at the Four Seasons Restaurant - a similar arrangement having been in effect when the legendary Robert Indiana was having a retrospective at the Whitney.



Ghost Bar & Lounge, 132A Eldridge Street, NYC

In addition to openings, the Woodward Gallery now has the Ghost Bar - a true New York oddity where a newly designated gallery space has been granted a liquor license. Boasting a range of works that runs the gamut from 1000 dollars to millions, the Woodward Gallery remains loyal to the premise that it can offer something of value to all. "Am I as idealistic as when I started?" Kristine responds to my query, "You know, while we like being a friendly living room, people get this weird notion that they're performing a public service by informing us what kind of art they collect or value

without any intention of buying. Honestly, galleries need patrons more than lectures."

Greeting all who enter the Gallery are the true aficionados of this Chinese corner of the city: the Woodward's illustrious Shar Peis. "Yes, they are revered in this area more than us or our Warhols," Kristine admits as she recalls an assortment of locals who came purely to pay their respects to the dogs. Having been an expert on several reality TV shows (i.e. the Novogratz), Kristine knows the value of websites, Facebook and the bevy of social media out there. Specialized in developing private and

corporate portfolios, the gallery is a personally edited anthology of over a century's worth of great art.

Neither a knock-off nor a desperate original, neither purposely trendy nor anti-cool in that hipster way, the Woodward Gallery is at ease with its neighborhood and its age; it is, in short, a door worth knocking on. Friendly, captivating and never cloying or pretentious, it - like the Shar Peis - has its owner's personality.

For more information:
Woodwardgallery.net



Woodward Gallery, 133 Eldridge Street, NYC