

Will Restoration Hardware Conquer the Art World?

by Ben Davis

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Toby Christian, "A Belgian Fence," 2013 (exhibition view)
(Courtesy of the artist and RH Contemporary Art / Photo credit: Adam Reich)



Samantha Thomas, "Landscapeification #3," 2012 / Courtesy of the artist and RH Contemporary Art

Today, Restoration Hardware is debuting a lavish new art space in Chelsea. While it's at it, the company will also be unleashing an expansive art website, a quarterly art journal, and a rotating artist residency in DUMBO. But [RH Contemporary Art](#), as the Chelsea gallery is called, is the linchpin of it all, a six-story, 28,000-square-foot commercial art showroom featuring newly commissioned work on West 16th Street. What does this corporate incursion into New York's most prestigious art neighborhood mean? Is RH Contemporary Art a joke, a threat, or an opportunity for more conventional art galleries that might partner with it to show their artists? Is

it a visionary game-changing initiative to bring contemporary art to a large audience, or a freakish Frankenstein monster destined to be run out of town by the angry citizens of Artville, with their torches of snark and pitchforks of withering critical indifference?

The endeavor is clearly part of a moment, coming on the heels of Amazon's [launch of its Fine Art vertical earlier this year](#). Corporate America's retail titans have heard the tales of fat art-world profits, and they want a piece. But the Amazon Fine Art Store and RH Contemporary Art are opposite poles of the same zeitgeist. Amazon being Amazon, its art project seems to be about stocking everything and everybody. Restoration Hardware's gambit — prices in the inaugural shows range from a few thousand to \$28K — seems aimed at reaching a niche that is well below the high end for art, but well above the high end for home décor. (For artists who already have representation, RH Contemporary Art promises to work with their galleries to make sure they don't undercut their own market.)

In case you haven't had cause to go into a Restoration Hardware recently: Gone are the days when it was just a store for artful furniture and funky doorknobs. Its [corporate strategy](#) under the flamboyant Gary Friedman — whose title these days is “chairman, creator, curator, and co-chief executive officer” — is to go very, very big. [RH Houston](#) was “envisioned as a majestic estate with beautiful European proportions,” according to a press release. It has a 7,000-square-foot rooftop garden, an artisanal tea atelier, and a display of nurseries decorated with fur and chandeliers. [RH Boston](#) is sited in the former New England Museum of Natural History and offers such amenities as an antique beer bar, an old-timey counterweight elevator, and “18-foot antiqued mirrored archways reflecting 12 sparkling crystal chandeliers reminiscent of the Palace of Versailles.” Most impressively, the [San Francisco Chronicle recently reported](#) that RH plans to revamp the former Exploratorium at the Palace of Fine Arts with an “indoor public park and cafe, a retail space, a contemporary art museum, a performing arts theater and, possibly, a small RH ‘guest house,’ the company's version of a boutique hotel, complete with a green roof to grow food for on-site use.” The San Francisco complex would also be the permanent home of the “Rain Room,” the crowd-pleasing attraction by the design-art stars Random International that the company, in a branding coup, purchased and lent to MoMA this summer as [the opening shot](#) in its push to dominate the art world.

In other words, the new RH Contemporary Art — which is merely the first of a planned chain of RH galleries around the country — makes sense not just as an exercise in branding (a la Louis Vuitton’s flirtations with art patronage), nor even as a corporate attempt to cash in on the art boom, but as a small piece of a much, much more ambitious reimagining of Restoration Hardware as an all-encompassing luxury lifestyle empire (“this is more than a brand, it’s a reflection of our beliefs,” Friedman declares in [a truly bonkers recent statement](#), also revealing in passing that he has abolished the company’s marketing department in favor of a “Truth Group.”) Following a luxe version of the “bricks-and-clicks” retail model, RH’s new stores [have been rethought](#): instead of emporia, they are meant as destination environments that showcase the brand’s most alluring wares, with the wider lines available through the Internet. RH Contemporary Art will follow a similar model: In addition to sales from the rotating shows in its physical galleries, its website offers commissioned works from some 50 partner artists. A call center staff of advisors will be available to give art-history background to potential collectors.

But enough about corporate strategy: How is the art? “I don’t want to sell art out of a furniture store,” the capable Holly Baxter, who is overseeing it all, told me as she showed me the impressive amenities of the new space. The work in this initial outing is not at all bad — though it is unfortunately rather decorous for an initiative that is working so hard to escape an association with décor. To its credit, RH Contemporary Art is not stocking the typical nouveau riche name brands that you might find at, say, Art Basel in Miami Beach. Instead, it seeks to fund original work by worthy emerging and mid-career artists, and the results in this first outing look more like the NADA Art Fair: funkified versions of traditional fine art objects, usually with some kind of diverting back story or amusing process involved; classy with an attitude.

Thus, Natasha Wheat (b. 1981), who in the past [created an artist-designed pop-up restaurant as a commentary on food policy](#) for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, here offers a suite of abstract compositions that evoke Rothko canvasses submitted to some kind of Instagram filter that renders them in tones of black and brown, sleeved in translucent silk, as well as glass works that involve her sandblasting around vinyl LPs of personal significance, leaving only a clear radius around a smoky ring. Nathan Baker (b. 1979) creates busy black-and-white abstractions on adhesive fabric, wall-filling decals full of jittery striped patterns made by yanking tape off of the surface. Samantha Thomas (b. 1980), fresh from [a](#)

[show at LAXART in Los Angeles](#), offers collage canvases made of messily overlapping pieces of linen, meant to evoke abstract landscapes. Toby Christian (b. 1983) — the first beneficiary of RH’s Brooklyn residency — presents both paintings that look like squeegeed blackboards and some demure, minimalist white benches.

The RH Contemporary Art team is at pains to emphasize that there is no house style — “the most talented young artists in the world,” was all I could get out of Baxter when I asked her what the gallery was looking for. She says that the next show, which opens at the end of January, will be much more eclectic, media-wise, incorporating performance and installation. A lot, after all, depends on how far RH Contemporary Art can break free of what people might already associate with “Restoration Hardware,” while still of course not doing anything to disgrace the brand. If putting a toilet into the context of an art space can make it read as a work of sculpture, then putting a painting into the context of a home goods store certainly risks making it read as mere decoration.

Then again, the art world of late has created an environment that celebrates itself as a high-end shopping experience, and, via the art-fair complex, coddled its clientele at its most distracted, so I might actually give RH Contemporary Art even odds at succeeding. There is no shortage of worthy artists out there looking for a break, and Restoration Hardware sees a market niche in offering them resources and attention. The potential success of RH Contemporary Art does, however, raise the specter of its corporate rivals copying the model. Is the world is ready for Pottery Barn Contemporary Art?