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Gary Friedman

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PORTRAIT BY ADRIAN GAUT

Rain Room, the exhibition that generated lines up to nine hours long at MoMA this summer, was built on a simple concept: trust. Visitors entered the 1,000-square-foot space, saw pouring rain, but—by some feat of what felt like magic—stayed dry as they moved through it. Upon entering, they trusted that the exhibition would protect them from getting wet—or so Gary Friedman, the chairman emeritus, creator, and curator of Restoration Hardware, interpreted the work.

“It really hit me,” Friedman recalls of his first reaction to Rain Room. “If you want to enter the exhibition, you have to walk through the rain—you have to *believe* in it.” Friedman promotes a similar system of faith at Restoration Hardware, which was officially rebranded as RH in 2012. He and his employees wear macramé bracelets with the word “Believe” inscribed on a silver tag to indicate their devotion to the company’s values—a set of written rules penned two years ago by Friedman, who’s been at the company since 2001.

To Friedman, Rain Room seemed like the ideal work to launch RH Contemporary Art, a platform that he had been developing since first coming up with the idea nearly a decade ago. In consultation with the art advisor and former gallerist Holly Baxter, now the vice president of RH Contemporary Art, Friedman made a move to purchase Rain Room from its artists, the London-based group Random International. After the Barbican arts center in London showed a prototype of Rain Room last fall, RH hoped to find an exhibition space for the work in the U.S.

MoMA director Glenn Lowry wanted to bring the project stateside, too, and called a meeting with Baxter. “They had seen it at the Barbican, and they thought it was one of the most important pieces of art in many years,” Friedman says. “I don’t know a lot about art. I didn’t even really understand the significance of the MoMA wanting to show this piece—the first piece we ever bought for our art program. The artists had to tell me, ‘The Barbican’s cool, but the MoMA is the holy grail.’ So we agreed to do it.”

Building on Rain Room’s success, Baxter tapped 15 international curators to set the tone of the RH Contemporary Art platform, which will feature an online gallery; an art journal with contributions from curators, critics, and artists; and a physical gallery in Manhattan’s Chelsea neighborhood—all debuting this November. The gallery, housed in a six-story, 28,000-square-foot building, will open with five concurrent solo exhibitions by emerging artists; works include black-and-white monochromes by Peter Demos and sculptural paintings by Samantha Thomas. The brand plans to open a gallery in Los Angeles next year and has its sights set on expanding to San Francisco, Miami, Chicago, and London.

“We knew the art world was going to say, ‘What’s a home-furnishing retailer doing in the art world?’” Friedman says. “For us, it seemed like a logical thing to do. We know that a lot of our customers are interested in art, and there’s more square footage on the walls of America’s homes than on the floors.” In fact, Friedman’s strategy at RH has been to treat the couches, dining tables, and décor objects the brand is known for like works of art. “Everything that we curate, we try to put into an environment that will elevate it,” Friedman says. “We want to take the things we believe in and put them on the right stage.”

Since he took over as CEO in 2001, Friedman has transformed RH, once known primarily for retro-inspired novelty knickknacks, into a luxury-design powerhouse. To him, continuing to take risks is essential to staying relevant in retail. Along with RH Contemporary Art, the brand is also entering another new industry: music. With the launch of RH Music this fall, it’s establishing a platform to promote emerging musical talent and collaborations. “Will the music and art we curate resonate with other people? Maybe, maybe not,” Friedman says.

Either way, he believes it’s a risk worth taking. “From the time we’re born, we’re taught to conform to conventional wisdom and thinking,” he says. “You have to step away and not become a victim of your own history.”

(OPPOSITE) Gary Friedman in front of a painting by Natasha Wheat at RH Contemporary Art’s new Chelsea gallery. (FOLLOWING SPREAD) Canvas works by Samantha Thomas for the gallery’s debut exhibition.



