

AN ARTISTIC RITE OF PASSAGE
An Interview With Erica Berkowitz, Director of the Last Rites Gallery

Conducted by Gabrielle Faust for *Gothic Beauty Magazine* ©2014

**“Both art and life are merely constructs of the reality
you choose to surround yourself with.”**
— Erica Berkowitz, *Director, Last Rites Gallery*

In the heart of Hell’s Kitchen, New York City resides one of the foremost meccas for the Dark Arts movement. As an evolution of owner Paul Booth’s desire to merge the worlds of tattoos and fine art, the Last Rites Gallery & Tattoo Theater has become internationally known for its exquisite cultivation of the true geniuses of Dark Art and the superb representation of their work. Their monthly exhibitions showcase the most profound and thought-provoking work, from breathtaking surrealistic oil paintings inspired by the work of the great masters to beautifully cryptic photography revolving around the study of the human body. The Last Rites Gallery challenges the preconceptions and pretensions of the modern art world, inviting enthusiasts and critics from all genres and mediums to expand their own definition of macabre and discover the true beauty at its heart. I spoke with Director Erica Berkowitz about the creation of the gallery that has so successfully elevated the voice of Dark Art and its purpose in modern society.

“The name ‘Last Rites’ began with Paul Booth’s tattoo studio and years later, extended to encompass his gallery as well,” Berkowitz said. “The macabre connotation of this term fit not only the dark nature of the artwork that both Booth and his gallery are known for, but for the rites of passage one experiences with the associated imagery.”

As to the origin of the inspiration for the Last Rites Gallery Berkowitz replied, “As a child, Paul Booth would draw monsters and demons; his subjects always focusing on the darker side of life. He continued down this macabre path as he developed his career as both a tattoo artist and fine artist. What would be more appropriate for him when he opened up an art gallery than to focus on this genre of art?”

Erica must rely on her keen eye in the selection and curation of new artists in order to deliver the extraordinary exhibitions the public has come to expect, month after month. Her own appreciation for works of a more gothic or horror-esque motif has its foundation in an acceptance and intrigue of the more haunting aspects of life and those who serve to represent it.

“My personal roots in the Dark Art movement come from my affinity towards stories and images of a darker nature,” she remarked. “I’ve always been drawn to and inquisitive about what made myself and others disturbed and uncomfortable and found the candidacy of authors, artists and

other creative professionals' desire and courage to expose such aesthetics or thoughts inspiring. The world is full of dichotomies. I believe a well-balanced life and psyche comes from exploring all facets of these polarities.”

“Last Rites regularly exhibits artists from a very specific pool of talent,” Berkowitz stated. “It is our priority to bring our clients and patrons the most thought provoking, emotive and intellectually stimulating content stemming from the darkest reaches of our artist’s soul. We prefer work that causes discomfort and raises questions, yet at the same time, forms a connection with our guests that they won’t find anywhere else.”

She continued on to say, “This quote has always resonated with us here at Last Rites Gallery. ‘Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable.’ It seems the author is indiscernible. We hope that the artwork we exhibit alongside the ambience we provide allows our guests to contemplate, question and leave with a new set of fingerprints on their soul.”

“Like all genres, the concept of ‘Dark Art’ can be rather subjective. What disturbs some may cause comfort in others. We ask every artist to use their palette, subject matter, lighting, etc. to communicate themes, stories or ideologies that fall within the shadows of their minds and hearts.”

Dark Art is a relatively new movement in the art world as a classification, though artists have incorporated disturbing and even nightmarish themes into their work for time immemorial. As the public has been introduced to, and subsequently seduced by work that they might have otherwise shied away from, the Last Rites Gallery has had the unique vantage point of watching the scope of their audience change and broaden over time.

Berkowitz stated, “Since Last Rites Gallery opened in 2008, we have seen both artists and patrons welcome the genre in their homes, artistic practices and lives. There has been an influx in artists who work with darker themes as well as clients who have taken to their works. We strongly hope that we exhibit art that although may be difficult for some, can still be respected and appreciated by all. Further, it is of the utmost importance to us that our artists can work freely and without judgment on their decision to work with such subjects.”

“In January of 2014, Last Rites Gallery and Tattoo Theatre relocated to a storefront, three floor, space on an up and coming block in the Garment District (midtown NYC). We certainly were an entirely new experience for both our neighbors and passerby’s on the street. We’ve had the pleasure to meet many different types of people and hear a variety of positive feedback. We have become a regular destination for many, and offer a very different side to the art world. New patrons have been pleasantly surprised to learn that such a genre exists and that there is a resurgence of old master painting (a period many of our artists study and embrace) within the

confines of an overpopulation of modern galleries. We also hope our new space has continued to intrigue and stimulate our dedicated patrons that have been with us since the beginning.”

While the demographic of their patrons continues to expand, there still remains, however, a stigma amongst many who are too fearful to enter the world of Dark Art.

“Our society and culture is still rather closed off to the darker nature of life,” Berkowitz said. “We hope to expose the beauty in these often unacknowledged aspects of existence, which after all, are essential to the human condition.”

She continued on to say, “Many of our exhibitions have showcased controversial images. From daguerreotypes by Mark Kessell that focused on deceased fetuses, to artists painting controversial figures such as Richard T Scott’s portrait of author Deborah Feldman bleeding vaginally in a landscape chock full of mythological allusions, we aim to create discourse and elicit emotional reactions.”

For those of us who already have immersed ourselves within this world, it is hard to contemplate how others could be fearful of approaching such subject matter for it is, after all, both a part of life and our own subconscious. I asked Erica what conclusions she had drawn from her observations over the years and what it is about Dark Art that draws us to it.

“Perhaps it is the intrigue about the unknown or an area of thought often left to the shadows?” she replied. “Despite opposition from some, there is no doubt that such darker aspects are a part of all of us. At some point or another, we are all bound to acknowledge this.”

The Last Rites Gallery has curated dozens of exhibits over the past six years. With each new event they have learned a valuable lesson, both about the art industry, as well as the public’s ever changing interaction.

“Every exhibition we hold in our space is successful in some way,” Berkowitz remarked. “Every artist teaches us something new. We are always learning. Success can encompass an array of results that expand past sales, press coverage and attendance. If at least one person takes something away from a work of art, and that particular piece stays with them, we’ve done our job correctly.”

Erica Berkowitz and Paul Booth share an optimistic vision for the future of the Last Rites Gallery that the world they have worked so hard to build and nurture will continue to thrive. More than anything they desire, “...a continued safe haven and home to our artists and patrons as well as more growth and acceptance of this genre through constant exhibitions in house, at art fairs both domestically and internationally and perhaps one day at a museum.”

Through the complicated intellects and haunting dreams of artists, and mediums as varied as the bones within our bodies, the Dark Art movement has given birth to the diary of modern civilization. The Last Rites Gallery will continue to give the pages of this diary a voice, one spectacular exhibition at a time.

* * *

www.lastritesgallery.tv