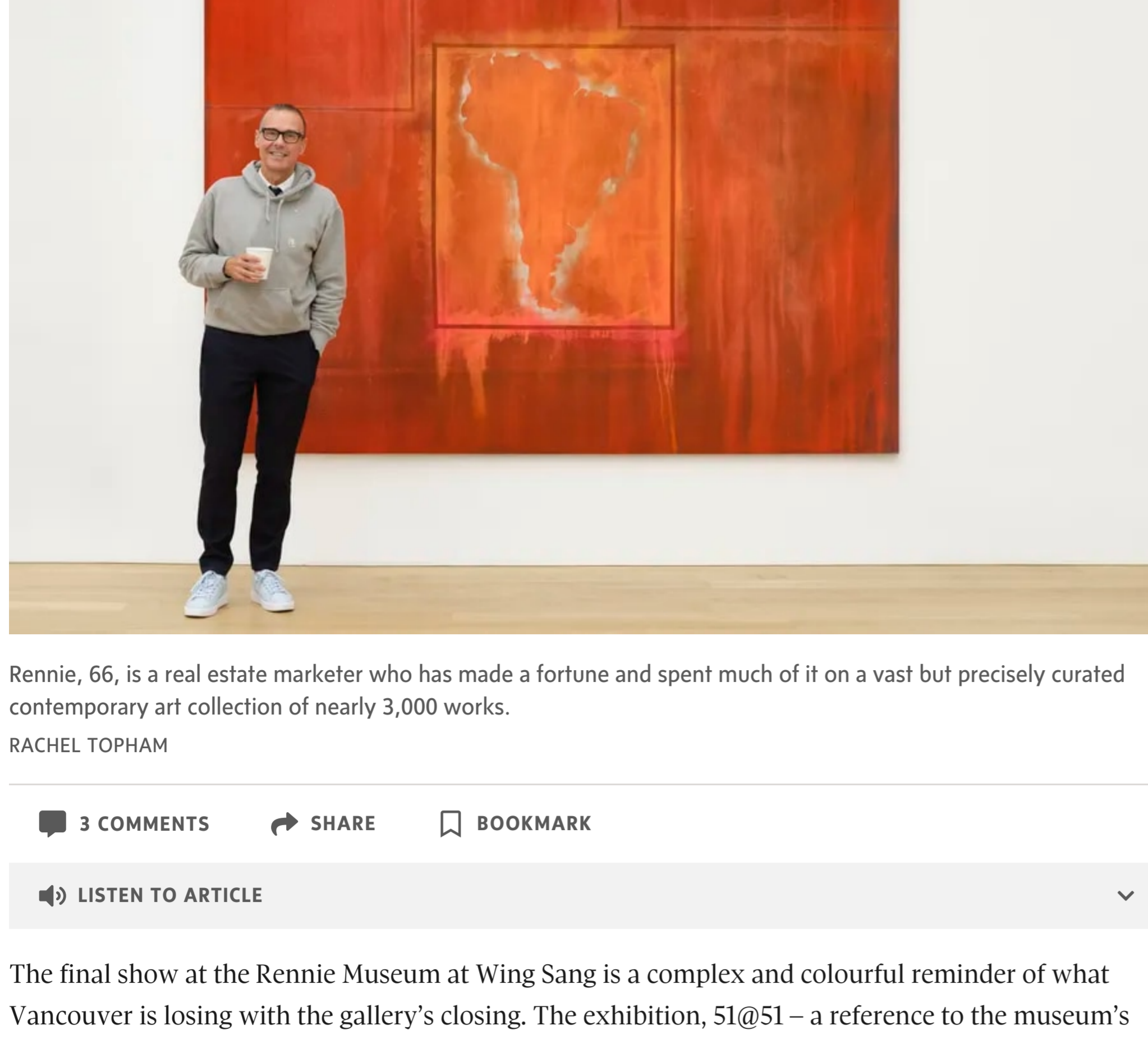


A complex and colourful last hurrah for the Rennie Museum at Wing Sang

MARSHA LEDERMAN VANCOUVER

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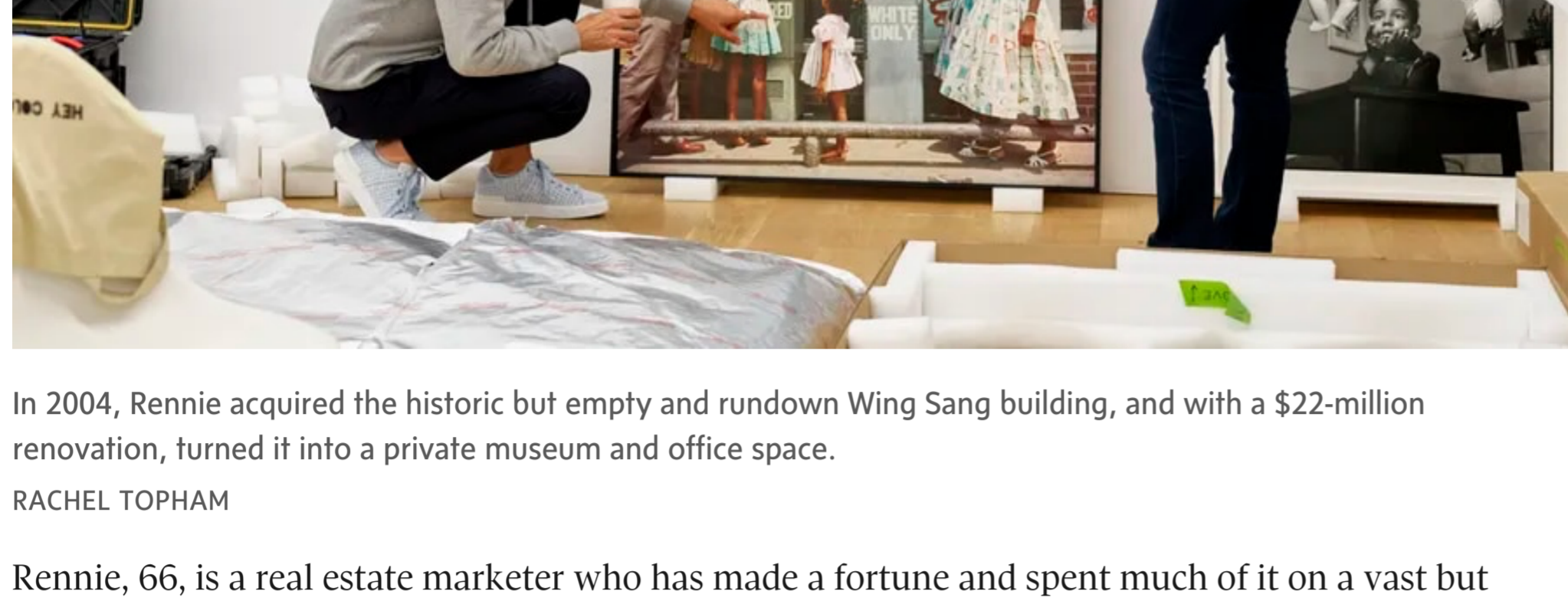
RACHEL TOPHAM

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The final show at the Rennie Museum at Wing Sang is a complex and colourful reminder of what Vancouver is losing with the gallery's closing. The exhibition, 51@51 – a reference to the museum's address, 51 East Pender St. – features 51 works, all but one of which are being shown in Canada for the first time. In one large space, works in neon, rope and other materials reflect the collection's central themes of race, social justice, inclusion and gender. A long narrow passageway speaks to the horrors of racism, illuminated in red light. Another large gallery features one aspect of Bob Rennie's collection that has received less attention over the years on these museum walls, his paintings.

"Our heart's in these rooms," says Rennie during a tour of the show as it was being installed. "It's the end of an era."

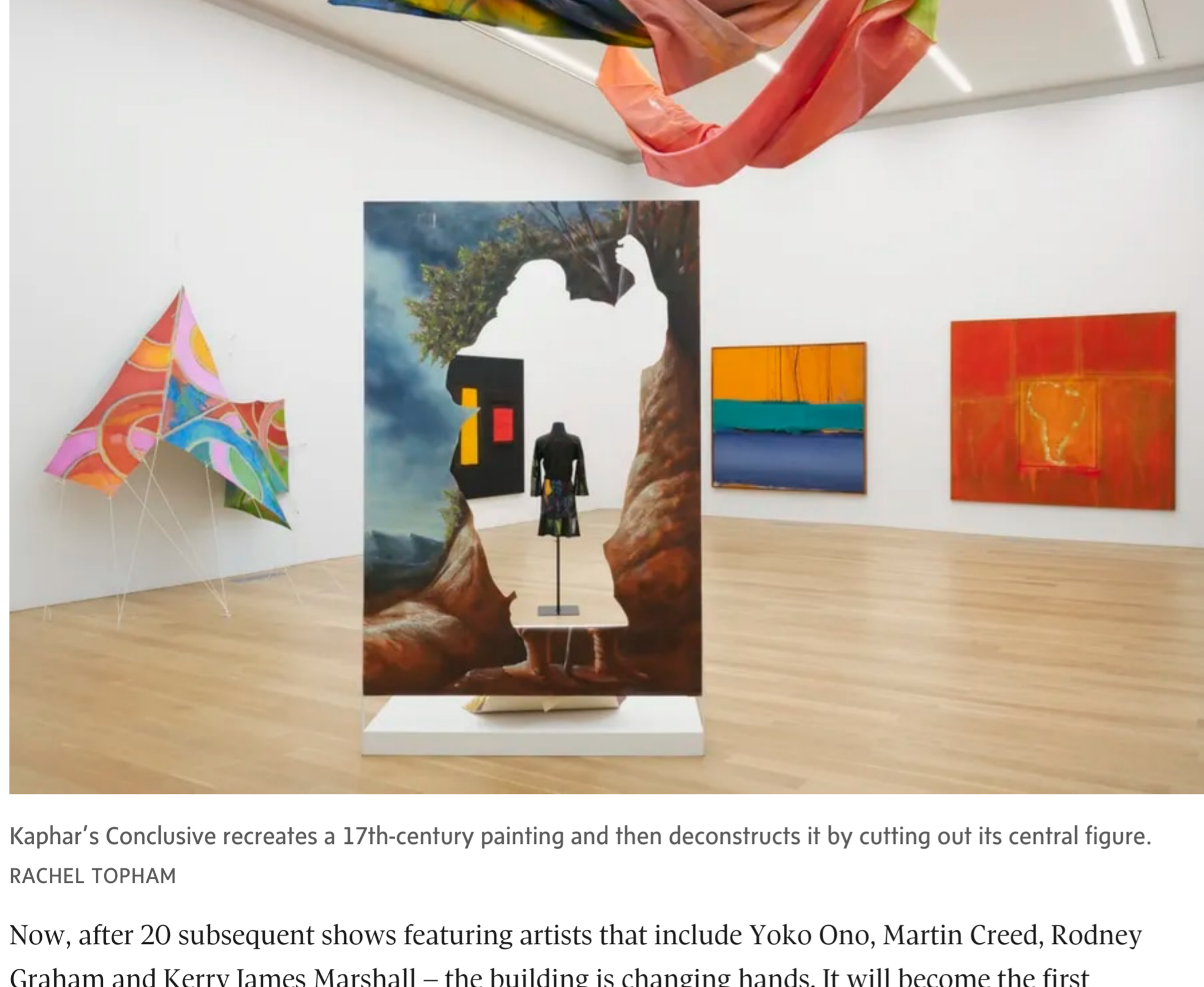


In 2004, Rennie acquired the historic but empty and rundown Wing Sang building, and with a \$22-million renovation, turned it into a private museum and office space.

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Rennie, 66, is a real estate marketer who has made a fortune and spent much of it on a vast but precisely curated contemporary art collection of nearly 3,000 works. In 2004, he acquired the historic but empty and rundown Wing Sang building – the oldest in Vancouver's Chinatown – and with a \$22-million renovation, turned it into a private museum (and office space) where he could show work from his collection to the public.

The space opened to great attention in 2009, with a show by the Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum. The building was still under construction. The day after about 800 people showed up for the opening – the hottest ticket in town – the entire show had to be taken down so the building could be finished.



Kaphar's *Conclusive* recreates a 17th-century painting and then deconstructs it by cutting out its central figure.

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Now, after 20 subsequent shows featuring artists that include Yoko Ono, Martin Creed, Rodney Graham and Kerry James Marshall – the building is changing hands. It will become the first permanent home of the Chinese Canadian Museum.

"Nothing lasts forever," says Rennie, sitting in the employee common room. It's been an education, he says. "If this was our master's, we're now going to get our doctorate."

The collection's director, Wendy Chang, says 51@51 is the most complex the gallery has mounted from a curatorial standpoint, with its 37 artists, numerous themes and varied types of work.

For the visitor, it is a non-stop sensory tribute to the collection and the space.



Immediately upon entering, the visitor is confronted with Jackson's *Rennie 101* (2009-2010), a work made directly on the wall for the museum's second show and afterwards built over to preserve the piece.

COURTESY OF RENNIE MUSEUM

The American artist Richard Jackson's *My Self Portrait as the Queen of England* (2018-2019) waves at passersby from the front window, beckoning them in. Immediately after entering, the visitor is confronted with Jackson's *Rennie 101* (2009-2010), a work made directly on the wall for the museum's second show. Rather than remove the piece after the show, the museum built a wall over it to preserve it. For 51@51, that wall has been removed so the work can be seen again.

"It's been hidden behind this wall," Chang says, "like an unseen kind of witness to every show since."

Up the stairs, past Hank Willis Thomas's large slogan button-like work *I am the Greatest* (2012) that is sure to become a selfie magnet, an airy gallery space buzzes with provocative works.

Thomas's *19,281 (2020)* (2021), an enormous flag with one star for each person killed by guns in the U.S. in a given year, hangs high in a corner, cascading down to the ground. Thomas makes a version of this work for every year; Rennie acquired the piece from 2020, the year that saw an uprising after the police killing of George Floyd.

The sombre installation presides over more colourful works that include South African artist Buhlebezwe Siwani's rope installation *Mombathiseni* (2021), Nick Cave's *Soundsuit* (2015) and Los Angeles artist Lauren Halsey's cheeky *LED sign installations*.

Also in this room: Cauleen Smith's *Light Up My Life (for Sandra Bland)* (2019) and Titus Kaphar's *Destiny Series: Sandra Bland, Renisha McBride, Tanisha Anderson* (2015), where the faces of the three killed Black women overlap each other on the canvas.



Four works featuring young Black swimmers, reference a lack of access for Black people to beaches and pools.

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Four works feature young Black swimmers, referencing a lack of access for Black people to beaches and pools. In Derek Fordjour's magnificent *Pool Boys* (2019), the central figure, diving into the water, is collaged from material that includes newspaper stock market listings. It stands next to *Lilo* (2018) by Jonathan Wateridge, a white artist who is from Zambia.

The other large gallery on this floor features large-scale paintings, including Kaphar's *Conclusive*, 2008-2009, where he has recreated a 17th-century painting and then deconstructed it by cutting out its central figure, which falls and lies face-down flat on a low plinth behind it.

The final room on this level vibrates like an homage to youth who have not always seen themselves reflected in culture – popular or otherwise, at the toy store or the art gallery. These works include Adrian Piper's *Barbara Epstein and Doll* (1966), made when Piper (who won the Venice Biennale's Golden Lion award in 2015) was just 18 – and Gordon Parks's *Doll Test, Harlem, New York* (1947), in which a Black child looks at two dolls, one white and one Black. He seems fixated on the white one.

When I ask about standout memories from the 13 years here, Chang talks about the student visitors, including a girl who came with her elementary school class years ago and, now in high school, told Chang on a recent visit that she was planning to go to art school.



A school group visits a Lara Favaretto exhibit in 2015.

COURTESY OF RENNIE MUSEUM

Chang also talks about a class of kindergartners and first graders in 2015, twirling among the carwash brushes of Italian artist Lara Favaretto's show. "Little kids responding to art where they didn't have to keep their mouth shut and hands behind their back," Chang says.

She also mentions a young Black girl who came with her class to see the 2018 Marshall show. The only Black child in the group, she attracted all kinds of positive attention and questions from her classmates, who seemed to see her in a different light as a result of the artwork dealing with the Black American experience. "She was beaming," Chang says. "She was literally standing up taller."

Rennie's partner in the endeavour, Corey Fouks, says when the museum reopened after the COVID-19 shutdown, he cried. "We're so proud of what we've done here," Fouks says.



As for what's next, Rennie's offices will relocate to a building he has purchased near Granville Island, where public-accessible art has already become part of the place.

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As for what's next, Rennie's offices will relocate to a building he has purchased near Granville Island, where public-accessible art has already become part of the place, with a Wangechi Mutu sculpture, acquired after it was installed in the façade alcoves at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Rennie is thinking seriously about a sculpture garden for Vancouver. And he will continue to lend out his work. Since the museum opened, it has lent more than 600 works to museums around the world. Currently, more than 75 pieces are out on loan to institutions that include the Met, Tate Modern, and the Guggenheim Bilbao. The loans will continue to be a major focus as museums around the world struggle.

"We are going to become more generous participants," Rennie says, pointing out that shipping and insurance costs have become prohibitively high for museums. To keep artists exposed to the public, he will look at supporting those costs as well. "I have a fantasy to be the best lender in the world."

51@51 is at the Rennie Museum in Vancouver Aug. 13-Nov. 12.

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