

Cotter, Holland. "MoMA Reshapes Image With 'Modernism Plus,'" *The New York Times*, 11 October 2019.



SUCCESSION H. MATISSE/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK; JEENAH MOON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Inspired juxtapositions in the collection galleries at the Museum of Modern Art include Henri Matisse's "The Red Studio" (1911), left, and Alma Woodsey Thomas's "Fiery Sunset" (1973).

MoMA Reshapes Image With 'Modernism Plus'

When the Museum of Modern Art reopens on Oct. 21 after a \$450-million, 47,000-square-foot expansion, it will finally, if still cautiously, reveal itself to be a living, breathing 21st-century institution, rather than the monument to an obsolete history — white, male, and nationalist — that it has become over the years since its founding in 1929.

**HOLLAND
COTTER**

**ART
REVIEW**

After decades of stonewalling

multiculturalism, MoMA is now acknowledging it, even investing in it, most notably in a permanent collection rehang that features art — much of it recently acquired — from Africa, Asia, South America, and African America, and a significant amount of work by women. In short, what's primarily different about the reopened MoMA is the integrated presence of "difference" itself — a presence that takes the museum back to its experimental early days, when American self-taught art and

non-Western art were on the bill.

Did we need a supersize (one-third larger), nearly blocklong multiplex MoMA — with a Diller, Scofidio + Renfro /Gensler extension tacked onto the 2004 building designed by Yoshio Taniguchi — to accommodate this presence? No. As we learn from every art fair every year, more art is not more. What's needed is agile planning and alert seeing, and these are evident in the museum's modestly scaled opening attractions, which

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MoMA Reshapes Its Image to Tell the Tale of 'Modernism Plus'



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include focused surveys of two African-American artists (Betye Saar and William Pope.L), installations by artists from India (Sheela Gowda and Dayanita Singh), a sampler of Latin American work, and a permanent collection gallery devoted to contemporary art from China.

But in every museum with an active acquisition program, the permanent collection galleries are key. They're the heart, brain and soul of the place; its history and memory. Special, short-term shows bring people through the door. But they end, move on. If you want to know what a museum is really about, what it's feeling and thinking, keep your eye on the art it owns and gives its walls and floors to, long-term.

Judged by this metric alone, the expanded MoMA is making obvious efforts to reshape its image without going entirely off-brand — to tell the



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tale of what might be called Modernism Plus, with globalism and African-American art added.

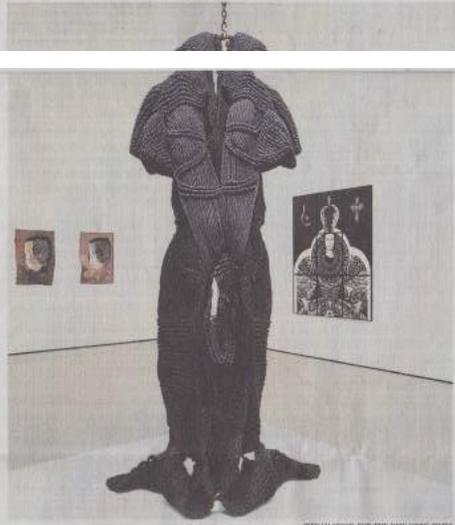
The museum has long been famous for inventing an unrivaled view of Modern art as a succession of marquee "isms" (Cubism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, etc.), and arranging its holdings to illustrate that. The very rough outline is still in place on the three floors of collection galleries: art from the 19th century through 1940 on five, from 1940 to 1970 on four, and from 1970 to the present on two. But the main route is now peppered with unexpected inclusions and interrupted by theme-based detours and byways.

Also, walls between disciplines, once firm, are down. The permanent gallery rehang, coordinated by five chief curators from departments across the museum, has been, and will be, a collaborative project. The prevailing style is mix-and-match, with sculpture, painting, design, architecture, photography and film bunking in together (something that will freak out orthodox modernists). But, rest assured, each discipline gets some space of its own.

The jumble can be confusing, as, at first, are certain features of the general floor plan. Previously, visitor traffic entering the main lobby from West 53rd Street flowed to the right, toward the Sculpture Garden and up to the galleries. Now you have a directional choice. You can still go that way, or opt to go left toward the new Geffen wing, where you will find, among other things, street-level galleries to which admission is free (as it has been, since 2013, to the Sculpture Garden).

One of these holds a selection of design items chosen by Paola Antonelli, senior curator in the department of Architecture and Design. Another, the double-height Projects 110 Gallery, has a set of penumbral oil-on-barkcloth narrative paintings by the young Kenyan-born painter Michael Armitage, in a New York solo debut. Organized by Thelma Golden, director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, this show is the first in a series to be presented here by the Studio Museum while its new David Adjaye-designed home is under construction.

Upstairs navigation is easier, familiar. As before, the permanent collection galleries begin, chronologically, in the Taniguchi building and move from there straight west into the Geffen, with black metal door frames marking the points of transition. And on the fifth floor, where



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Museum of Modern Art
The museum reopens to the public Oct. 21 (member previews begin Oct. 12); moma.org.

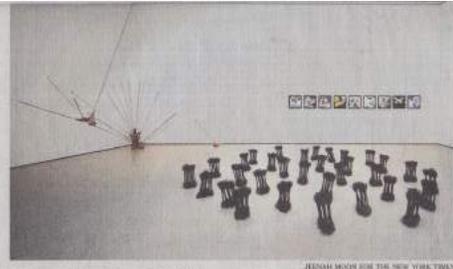
"Starry Night" in an asylum in the south of France. And in the year Ohr died, in Mississippi, even locally all but unknown, Brancusi finished his first version of "Endless Column," on view just beyond the gallery door. In the pre-expansion MoMA, these three artists were unlikely to have met. Here they're caught up in formal and psychological conversation.

Farther on, after you've passed through a mesmerizing gallery of early photographic images — including Anna Atkins's lacy 1850s botanical studies and a 1905 film of the New York City subway, looking every bit as funky then as now — you find another meeting of artistic minds, this one a genuine stunner.

The gallery itself is a virtual Picasso shrine, with his 1907 "Les Femmes d'Alger" (O.J. version) on the wall. The pictures ranged around it. But there's a major out-of-time entry here too: a 1967 painting, acquired in 2016, by the African-American artist Faith Ringgold depicting an explosive interracial shootout. Titled "American People Series #20: Die," it speaks to "Demotieselles" both in physical size and in visual violence. And just by being there it points up the problematic politics of a work like Picasso's — with its fractured female bodies and colonialist appropriations — that is at the core of the collection. MoMA traditionalists will call the pairing sacrilegious; I call it a stroke of curatorial genius.

There are other such moments, less emphatic, on all three floors. One comes with the sight of Alma Woodsey Thomas's incandescent 1973 "Fiery Sunset" plugged into an otherwise all-Matisse room. And there are several in a group installation evoking the matchless clan of the New York City painter Florine Stettheimer.

No curatorial credits are posted anywhere. But I hope that whoever chose to include a 1981 piece by the



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The prevailing style at MoMA is mix-and-match. Clockwise from top left, Arch Connelly's pearl-encrusted "Self-Portrait" (1981); Vincent van Gogh's "The Starry Night" (1889), left, alongside Henri Rousseau's "The Sleeping Gypsy" (1897), with gnarly ceramic bowls by George Ohr of Biloxi, Miss., in the foreground; left and center, Senga Nengudi's "R.S.V.P. I" (1977/2003) and Maren Hassinger's "Leaning" (1980); and, from left, Gets Bratescu's "Medea's Hypostases III and IV," from 1980, with Mrinalini Mukherjee's sculpture "Yakushi" (1984) and Zofia Kulik's "The Splendor of Myself II" (1997).

1993), will accept my personal thanks. The Connelly contribution, a mirror-shaped canvas encrusted with hundreds of fake pearls and titled "Self-Portrait," suits the Stettheimerian "extravagance-is-me" ethos to a T.

On the long historical walkabout of some 60 collection galleries spread over three floors, there's pretty much something for everyone. You get a big hit of Jackson Pollock, a Frida Kahlo fix, megadoses of Pop and Surrealism; Soup Cans, "Water Lilies," and Cindy Shermans to burn — all the things that many people come to MoMA, selfie sticks in hand, to see.

But you also get specialty shows, the equivalent of mini-seminars, on books made by artists in Revolution-era Russia (most are by women), on architecture as sculpture, and on the epic potential of Latin American Mail Art. And there's one exhibition, smallish in floor space but large in material, focused on the poet Frank O'Hara, who was a MoMA curator. To some visitors these will seem esoteric and pass-by-able, but they're a testament to the museum's archival depths and its scholarly chops. And, once you put a toe in, they're fun.

Finally, we get charismatic images by names that should be on every art-

Bratescu, Graciela Carnevale, Sari Dienes, Rosalyn Drexler, Valle Export, Boitric Gonzalez, Maren Hassinger, Atsuko Tanaka, along with Benny Andrews, Ibrahim El-Salahi, and May Stevens, all three part of the exceptionally strong installation of Vietnam War-era art, "War Within, War Without," that brings the fourth floor rehang to a close.

Work by many of these artists has entered the collection in just the past few years. (When you're traveling the galleries, pay attention to the acquisition dates on the labels; they can tell you a lot about the politics of purchase.) Much of it could find no place in MoMA's canonically gated modernist story. The current version of Modernism Plus is by no means an in-depth rewrite, but it has the makings of one, depending on how it's developed.

And, in one of the most promising features of the reopened museum, the mechanics for development are there. Post-expansion plans call for regular rotation and refreshment of the collection. Every six months, a third of the galleries on floors five, four and two will be reinstalled. By the end of 18 months, everything, the promise is, will, have been rethought. Destination.

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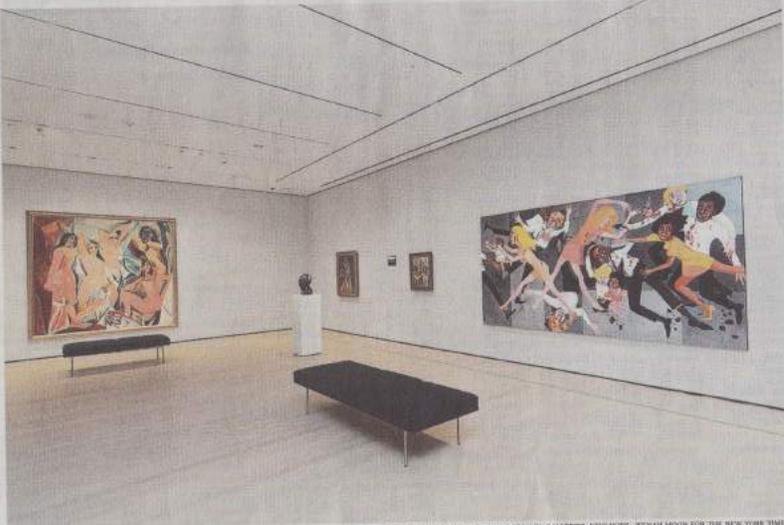
transition. And on the fifth floor you're eased into a plunge into modernism with a grouping of Brancusi sculptures set just outside the galleries themselves.

The Brancusi installation is classic MoMA: white walls, lots of air, few words. The idea is that this art doesn't need commentary; it speaks for itself, and anything added, beyond light and space, is superfluous. You can argue with this approach — I do, I like lots of take-it-or-leave-it contextual information — but it has always been the MoMA way. Inside the galleries, the old-school hands-off mode continues, though with some tweaks. Each gallery has (at least) a short thematic title, so visitors can get a sense of what connects the works of art in the room — an idea, a medium, a place, a time — and a brief explanation of the theme.

The first gallery, now labeled "19th Century Innovators," is pretty much a painting hit parade — Cezanne's "Still Life with Apples" (1895-98), Rousseau's "The Sleeping Gypsy" (1897) and, straight ahead, van Gogh's "The Starry Night" (1889) — with a few painterly prints (Mary Cassatt, Pierre Bonnard) thrown in. But to this familiar two-dimensional European world MoMA has introduced an American wild card: half a dozen nugget-like ceramic bowls and jugs by George Ohr (1857-1918), the self-proclaimed "Mad Potter of Biloxi."

Ohr was turning out hundreds of these gnarly, pinched earthenware vessels in the American South at the same time Van Gogh was painting

d' Avignon" at the center, and related East Village artist Arch Connelly (1950- lover's A-list but aren't — yet: Geta



favorites — "Starry Night," "Desmoiselles" — will no doubt stay on view, but what's around them will change, which will change them, too.

Such flexibility offers tremendous potential for new thinking, particularly at a museum whose curatorial staff has, in the past few years, begun to diversify (though not its board of trustees). Flexibility also, it's worth saying, allows the option of backpedaling should the opening "new" model prove to be little too new for a healthy box-office.

My guess is that in some hopefully ever-improving version, this 21st century MoMA will work, if only for self-preservation reasons. Multicultural is now marketable. To ignore it is to forfeit profit, not to mention critical credibility. And the new MoMA is obviously tailored to a new and younger audience, one that has no investment, nostalgic or otherwise, in the old pre-Taniguchi model, which now lives on mostly in the memories of a fading population (which itself had no direct experience of the original, progressive 1930s museum).

On the evidence of what I see in the reopened museum, a bunch of very smart curators are putting their heads together to work from inside to begin to turn a big white ship in another direction. We're not talking Revolution. With this museum we probably never will. But in the reboot there are stimulating ideas and unexpected, history-altering talents around every corner. As long as both keep showing up at MoMA, so will I.

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Surprising pairings abound in the rehang, including, left, Picasso's "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)" (1911-12) with Faith Ringgold's "American People Series #20: Die" (1967). MoMA traditionalists will call this pairing sacrilegious.