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# SFMOMA's expansion offers a deep dive into blue-chip artists' works

by Christopher Knight

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art opens its doors to the public on May 14, just shy of three years after closing for a \$305-million expansion of its building, now doubled in size. The new galleries are capacious and well organized.

The big attention-getter will likely be the fifth and sixth floors. They house impressive monographic galleries, each tracking a single artist in splendid isolation.

The numbers are extraordinary.

Individual rooms feature 24 hard-edge abstract paintings, drawings and reliefs by Ellsworth Kelly; 18 figurative and abstract paintings by Gerhard Richter; 14 silkscreens on canvas by Andy Warhol (most from the crucial 1960s); 11 Photorealist artist portraits in various media by Chuck Close; seven Agnes Martin grid and stripe paintings (installed in a heptagon-shaped room, recalling the sublime space at the Harwood Museum in Taos, N.M., where the artist once lived); five geometrically ordered Minimalist sculptures by Carl Andre; and five monumental mixed-media paintings of a decaying German mythos by Anselm Kiefer (plus one large model airplane in lead, an emphatically heavier-than-air machine conjuring the cruel historical weight of the failed Luftwaffe and its celebrated pilot artist, Joseph Beuys).

Elsewhere there's a lovely glass-walled gallery with 11 delicate sculptures (mostly mobiles) by Alexander Calder; another with four Richard Serra sculptures of precariously balanced steel plates plus a classic site-specific piece in which he splashed molten lead into the gutter between a wall and the floor, as well as an enormous rolled steel labyrinth-sculpture in a new museum lobby; and a room of 26 distinctive Diane Arbus photographs of socially marginalized people navigating life in a new era dominated by homogenized mass media.

I lost count of the number of Sol LeWitt abstract wall drawings and Minimalist cube sculptures, both exploiting a predetermined structural idea to generate the art. Suffice to say: a lot.

And that's just to start. Phew! It's a blue-chip blow-out.

You might also notice that this is entirely a selection of New York wares, almost all by men, with some produced in Germany but all vetted in Manhattan's governing marketplace. That doesn't mean that it's bad — especially because a lot, if not most, is very, very good. (Are better surveys of Warhol, Richter or Kelly displayed in any museum? No.) It's deep but narrow.

Nor is a gallery of comparable scope devoted to an artist of equal significance from San Francisco or Los Angeles, even though this is a venerable California museum and there are plenty of candidates. Serra is the closest SFMOMA comes: He was born in the city in 1938 but left California at 22 for art school at Yale.

Most of the work in the monographic galleries is on a renewable long-term loan — effectively permanent, barring unforeseen upheaval — from the contemporary painting and sculpture collection amassed by Gap clothing founders Doris and Donald Fisher. It totals 1,100 works, one-quarter are on view. Like Eli and Edythe Broad, their Los Angeles counterparts, the Fishers ramped up their collecting in the 1980s, the decade that launched the now-stratospheric market for blue-chip contemporary art.



The resulting collection is what it is — and for what it is, it's exceptional. Going forward, SFMOMA's challenge is to broaden the purview.

The museum's ambitious building project, launched seven years ago, was prompted to accommodate the Fisher collection. (Another \$305 million was raised toward endowment and other expenses.) The handsomely appointed result warrants the overused term transformational. Exactly what the museum is being transformed into, however, is not yet clear.

That is to be expected, given the circumstances. One reason is that the city that has been the institution's home for more than 80 years is itself undergoing a sea change.

As the first shovels of dirt were being moved to build a seven-story wrap-around of SFMOMA's existing, still-new 1995 structure, the invasion of tech workers from nearby Silicon Valley was underway. The deluge is turning a historically modest urban enclave into something on the order of a commuters' bedroom suburb — albeit one with amenities galore and a cost of living to match.

That hasn't existed anywhere in the U.S. before. An established if fluid sense of community, long a notable San Francisco hallmark, is now under stress.

Inevitably endangered is an art scene with artists at its center, rather than institutions, wealthy collectors and powerful dealers. Opportunities are disappearing for space in which to live and work. Artists get pushed out, and the arrival of young artists, who renew a city's cultural lifeblood, is interrupted.

Another reason for the lack of clarity is museum-specific. SFMOMA is opening at a time when the nature of art museums is likewise under stress.

SFMOMA's expansion tries mightily but ultimately rings a bit hollow

Once firmly embedded in their local communities, more and more art museums now chase transient tourists. San Francisco may be only America's 13th largest city, but it's also among the top destinations in lists of national and international U.S. travel.

This is especially true of contemporary art museums. Despite the word "Modern" in its title and a history traced to the Great Depression's darkest days, the newly expanded SFMOMA is now more than ever a contemporary art museum. Art since the 1960s is the centerpiece.

In conversations during a recent visit, museum director Neal Benezra and chief curator Gary Garrels were keenly aware of the complex institutional issues. But they also have a museum to open. Sensibly, the building's inaugural presentations recognize that things are in flux.

Typically a project like this would debut with a reconceived installation of the permanent collection and perhaps a major special exhibition. Instead, SFMOMA's inauguration is marked by a whopping 18 shows — all drawn from the collection. (I saw all 18 in one day, which I do not recommend.) The program displays justifiable pride in what the museum has acquired, including Bay Area art, while subtly suggesting that recent art histories are anything but fixed.

Even the second floor, housing the historical collection, is affected. The installation largely re-creates the spotty but sporadically great collection hanging on the same walls when the museum closed in June 2013. Now it feels less like a static, woefully incomplete lesson in art history and more like the fitful story of the city's museum. Big gaps in Modern painting and sculpture feel less important.

SFMOMA would surely love to have an Analytical Cubist Picasso painting. Yet, hanging exactly where they were before are Henri Matisse's radically brilliant 1905 portrait of his wife, "Woman With a Hat," shaping space and form just with color and line; Frida Kahlo's 1931 dual portrait of herself and husband Diego Rivera, mythologizing both; and, Jackson Pollock's 1943 exercise in coded messaging from the unconscious, "Guardians of the Secret."

More important for the motivation to build the new building, however, is a room of six abstractions by Clyfford Still, selected from 28 monumental paintings given in 1975 by the pivotal Abstract Expressionist. This deep, single-artist room is a template for the Fisher collection shows upstairs.

So the inaugural has been sensibly organized by turning to an established SFMOMA strength. Another is photography and its media arts cousins, both analog and digital. Wonderful to see is Beryl Korot's 1974 "Dachau," a probing four-channel video of a notorious killing factory turned into a queasy tourist site.

The museum's elaborate new Pritzker Center for Photography is billed as the largest facility of its kind in an American museum. Its 15,000 square feet make it roughly twice the size of the Getty Museum's Brentwood photo galleries, although its nearly 18,000 photographs — a very fine holding — are dwarfed by the Getty's 200,000 images.

Two shows, one on Western landscapes and the other on photographic conceptions of time, are on view. But the combined display of a whopping 356 photographs is excessive. Coming upon Jason Lazarus' newly commissioned photo installation, "Recordings #3 (At Sea)," is a relief.

Lazarus pinned scores of ordinary found snapshots facing the wall, exposing only their descriptive annotations written on the back ("Father and Paul in the hayfield," "I left," "Down the mountainside"). Imagination and memory intersect as pictures in the mind's eye — apt for photography.

SFMOMA has also been careful to highlight its ongoing "Campaign for Art," which has garnered some 3,000 individual gifts. The museum, while acknowledging the monumental Fisher collection, is plainly concerned about appearing to have a lone, big-foot benefactor. (Separate catalogs chronicle both acquisitions.) While including some individual works superior to Fisher examples, such as 1960s paintings by Ed Ruscha and John Baldessari, the campaign is also far more diverse in its artistic representation of ethnicity, gender and geography.

That's essential for a contemporary museum in a globalized art world. But it also speaks to a thorny problem.

Art in today's expanded field cannot be comprehensively contained. SFMOMA now has impressive strengths in New York Pop and Minimalism, recent German painting, camera work and numerous established individual artists. Where will it go from here?