The Wall Street Journal
Hanging Editorials on the Walls at MOMA
Peter Plagens
10 October 2019

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

The Museum of Modern Art navigates the treacherous waters of contemporary art.

Installation view of the 'Before and After Tiananmen' gallery PHOTO: IWAN BAAN/MOMA, NY

The Museum of Modern Art is doing the best it can with what it's got. Ordinarily, a statement like that indicates mild, if sympathetic, derision. In MoMA's case, however, we're talking about an institution that possesses nearly 200,000 art objects. Its unequaled collection makes MoMA a lion amid pussycats, and with its new expansion yielding more than 40,000 additional square feet of exhibition space, it roars louder than ever. Or should.

All that space gives exhibited works from the museum's nonpareil trove plenty of room to breathe, and visitors an opportunity to see art clearly and take it in individually. The new MoMA is also able to correct, and even make reparations for, its heretofore almost exclusive parade of white male superstars. Previously, only about 1/20th of the art in the museum's permanent collection was by women; that fraction now exceeds a quarter and is moving toward a third.

Since art museums are, or should be, as much about the visual pleasure derived from looking at and contemplating individual works of art as they are about documenting, explaining and indeed promoting greater progressive currents, one of many thanks going to MoMA curators should be for presenting Maria Lassnig's smearily haunting 1987 painting, "Transparent Self-Portrait."

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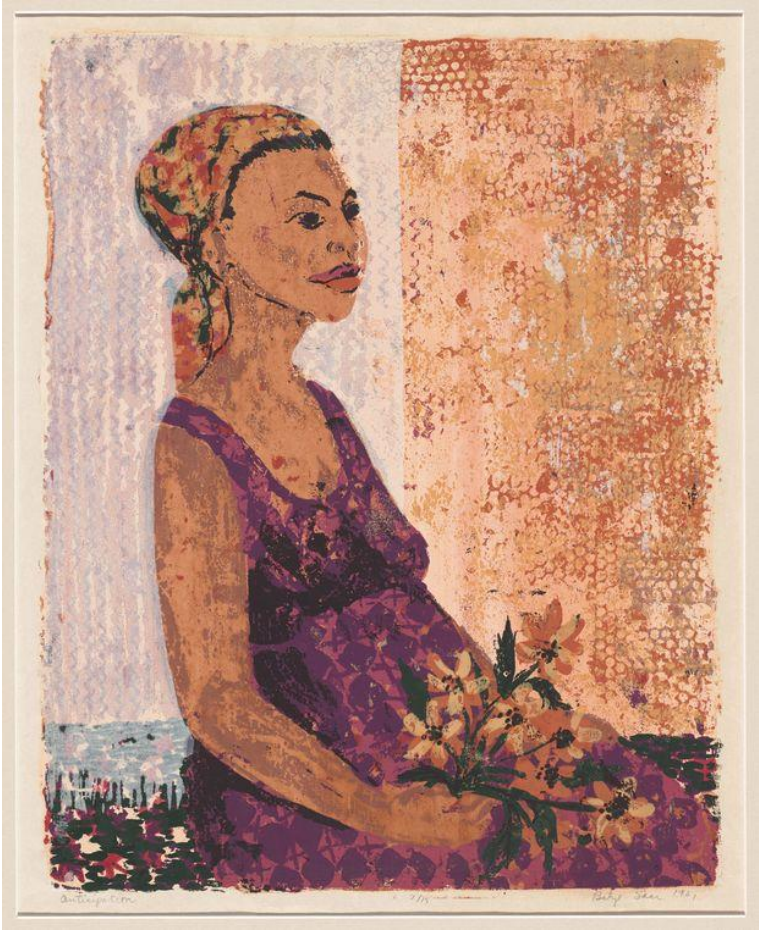

Betye Saar's 'Anticipation' (1961) PHOTO: BETYE SAAR/ROBERTS PROJECTS, LA/MOMA, NY

Nonwhite artists get a better deal, too. Jean-Michel Basquiat's painting "Glenn" (1985) is one of his best, possibly able even to convince detractors that he wasn't just a kind of black Byronic flash-in-the-pan. Sculptor Melvin Edwards's row of compact, welded-metal work from his 1980s "Lynch Fragments" series is as close as spectators will get to historical punches in the nose and still feel they're in the presence of art.

The 93-year-old Betye Saar, probably Los Angeles's most revered black artist, gets her own quiet knockout of a show—folkily mystical works on paper—drawn almost entirely from the museum's collection. The enigmatic Pope.L is another recipient of an off-collection mini-solo show; suffice it to say that, even in MoMA's anthology, it's unique.

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Maria Lassnig's 'Transparent Self-Portrait' (1987) PHOTO: ESTATE OF MARIA LASSNIG/MOMA, NY

Now, back to the collection: Even with this more inclusive approach, the more contemporary versions of early modernist male heroes are far from shortchanged. In "Equal" (2015), a gobsmacking tonnage of eight solid steel blocks, each nearly six feet square, Richard Serra somehow manages to overcome feelings of, "Oh, not that mega-industrial derring-do again." His surprising combination of ominousness and joy is a gritty symphony of sheer weight. On the surreally visceral side of things, the all too real-looking slab of meat, made of wax, in Paul Thek's "Hippopotamus Poison" (1965) is a creepy, gothic treat.

There's a noticeable drop-off, though, in the quality (that measuring stick of the critic Clement Greenberg that has been deemed irrelevant in our age of identity politics) of art between MoMA's holdings in textbook modernism—from Impressionism to Pop Art—and much of the more current fare. An irreverent gestalt: Compared to the snap, crackle and pop of the galleries housing pre-1970s art, the more contemporary chambers feel as though a large vat of melted vanilla ice cream was poured over them. Worse, the works of art generally try to tell more than show. Newer art is less art-about-art than editorials about what art should be, sociopolitically, in a fraught and divisive world.

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Paul Thek's 'Hippopotamus Poison' (1965) PHOTO: PAUL THEK/MOMA, NY

The museum has said that in place of some big single narrative about modern art, it now wants to tell interconnected "short stories" that viewers will put together in their own combinations. This approach gives us the film-and-photograph introspections (in a series of galleries called "True Stories") of Wolfgang Tillmans ; a friendly takedown of Wonder Woman in a video by Dara Birnbaum ; some small alphabet drawings by a tagger known as Rammellzee; a series of close-up color photographs by Cang Xin of a tongue tip touching everything from money to flowers (in the "Before and After Tiananmen" section that makes one wonder why in a New York museum there is no "Before and After 9/11" section); and in "Print, Fold, Send," another section of the show, enough office-work-looking paper to make the place seem like a trading floor.

Partial explanations for the sea change are that back in the day modern art was still a little outré, the acquired taste of a small set of people, and MoMA was just about the only game in town. Significant works were obtained more cheaply and, had an adventurous collector wanted to make a donation to a public wall or floor, MoMA was the obvious if not only choice. These days it's mainstream, and a plethora of other museums, inside and outside of New York, are credible destinations.

MoMA desires to retain and reinforce its status as the official headquarters of modern—and now postmodern and post-postmodern—art. How, in this chunk of very valuable prime Manhattan real estate and with a modern architectural luxuriousness that would make Croesus the King of Lydia envious, could it be otherwise? On the other hand, witness the banishment of such well-known indicators as "Abstract Expressionism" from its list of anodyne gallery titles that includes "Building Citizens," "Public Images" and "New Monuments." The museum also wants to remain flexible, almost noncommittal. (The hyper-accessible label "Pop Art" is veritably infantilized into "From Soup Cans to Flying Saucers.")

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Marisol's 'Love' (1962) PHOTO: MARISOL/MOMA, NY

If there's one work in the museum's magnificent collection that, in popular parlance, says it all about the new MoMA, it's Marisol's "Love" (1962)—a supine half-head into whose mouth is inserted a nearly full bottle of Coca-Cola. We wince at the cruelty, but we also wonder whether it just might be possible for the unseen parts of this person to swallow it all. If the person is MoMA and the soft drink is art from Monet to Jeff Koons and beyond, the answer is, "With enough real estate and money, yes." The question remains whether it's digestible.

—Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.