

SLANT

LOOSE CANON

October 21, 2019 • Chloe Wyma on the reopened MoMA



Foreground: Maria Martins's *The Impossible, III*, 1946. Background: Wifredo Lam's *The Jungle (La Jungla)*, 1943 (left), and Maya Deren's *A Study in Choreography for Camera*, 1945 (right). All photos: Chloe Wyma.

IN JUNE, NEW YORK'S MUSEUM OF MODERN ART WENT DARK to put the finishing touches on its contentious five-year expansion, which promised to put \$450 million and 47,000 square feet of Diller Scofidio + Renfro architecture toward fostering a “deeper experience of art” across boundaries of media, geography, and identity. Today, MoMA emerges from its chrysalis a bigger, brighter, and supposedly more progressive institution. Gone—we are told—is the stiff, developmentalist progression from ism to ism, the residual

investment in medium specificity, the instinctive parochialism, the cult white of male genius (things all arguably congenial to modernism, or at least to MoMA's historical telling of it)

The museum's collection unfolds in a loosely chronological series of thematic rooms, each one devoted to a broad transhistorical topos, a particular figure or moment in art history, or a shared set of artistic problems. Enlarged interiors accommodate photogenic sightlines, and splashy juxtapositions bubble up from the Instagram unconscious. Reading in the gallery is kept to a minimum, presumably to unencumber visitors' experience of the collection, even though knowledge of art usually enables one's enjoyment of it, not the other way around.



Background: Fernand Léger, *Three Women*, 1921–22 (left), and Eileen Gray, *Screen*, 1922 (right).

Foreground: Man Ray, *Chess Set*, 1920–26.*

Space has been made for women artists and artists of color: from the kaleidoscopic flow of Sonia Delaunay-Terk's *Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Joan of France*, 1913, to the xanthous encrustation of Beauford Delaney's *Composition 16*, 1954–56, from Gabriele Münter's velvety *Interior*, 1908, to Martin Wong's Lower East Side nocturne *Stanton near Forsyth Street*, 1983. There are inspired and intentional conversations across media—see, for example, the contest of grids between designer Eileen Gray's lacquered *Screen*, 1922, and Fernand Léger's reformed Cubism, or the intimations of Barnett Newman's trademark “zips” in Louise Nevelson's *Hanging Column* sculptures. There are also welcome surprises from famous artists, such as Josef Albers's surreal mannequin photographs and Lucio Fontana's glazed ceramic *Crucifixion*, 1948. Opalescent and overcome with labial folds, this weird tabletop sculpture is easy to miss amid the Sturm und Drang of “Responding to War,” a room nominally organized around Picasso's *The Charnel House*, 1944-45, but dominated by the rock-ribbed combination of David Alfaro Siqueiros's *Collective Suicide*, 1936, and José Clemente Orozco's *Dive Bomber and Tank*, 1940.



Remedios Varo, *The Juggler (The Magician)*, 1956, oil and inlaid mother of pearl on board, 35 3/4 x 48".

New acquisitions suggest exciting directions for the museum, from Remedios Varo's fey medieval fantasy *The Juggler (The Magician)*, 1956, its protagonist's face finely painted on inlaid mother-of-pearl, to Ibrahim El-Salahi's *Prison Notebook*, 1976, which abstracts six months of carceral trauma into thirty-eight ink-on-paper drawings of barred windows, excruciated ciphers, and menacing automata. MoMA has gone shopping, but it has also looked to its past for models of an inclusionary, anti-elitist museology. No doubt encouraged by the National Gallery of Art's recent "Outliers" show in Washington DC, the curators of the "Masters of Popular Painting" room draw on MoMA's many exhibitions of "self-taught, folk or popular artists" mounted in the 1930s and early '40s. Here we see *Nurse Supervisor*, ca. 1940, by William Edmondson, a tombstone maker by

trade who in 1937 became the first African American artist to have a solo show at the museum. Referring simultaneously to a female figure and the limestone block from which it was carved, Edmondson's elegiac sculpture neighbors Morris Hirshfield's gnomically wonderful *Tiger*, 1940, once hailed by MoMA's founding director, Alfred H. Barr Jr., as the most "unforgettable animal picture" he had ever seen. (It goes unmentioned in the gallery, but Hirshfield's inclusion is something of an act of institutional atonement: In 1943, Barr gave the retired slipper manufacturer a full-scale retrospective. It was, according to one account, "one of the most hated shows the Museum of Modern Art ever put on," and Barr was fired from his directorship shortly thereafter.)

There are forced conversations, but also missed encounters—moments where MoMA sits out the opportunity to question its reflexive hagiographies.



Background: paintings by Morris Hirshfield. Foreground: William Edmondson, *Nurse Supervisor*, c. 1940.

Downstairs, Brazilian sculptor Maria Martins's ferocious *The Impossible, III*, 1946, a deathmatch in bronze between weaponized male and female forms, introduces “Out of War,” which pulls on various threads of diasporic surrealism. Visual and conceptual through lines lead from the galactic architecture of Sonja Sekula's *The Town of the Poor*, 1951, to Maya Deren's *A Study in Choreography for Camera*, 1945—showing the renowned African American dancer Talley Beatty leaping and dervishing amid Buddhist statuary at the Met—to Wifredo Lam's *The Jungle*, 1946, a powerful syncretic brew of cannibalized primitivism and Afro-Cuban ritual. Like the best of MoMA's collection rooms, “Out of War” exquisitely calibrates visual pleasure, representational politics, and art history, opening onto intellectual constellations while remaining rooted in the specificities of time and place.



Left: Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, 1907. Right: Faith Ringgold, *American People Series #20: Die*, 1967.

MoMA's holdings shine in moments like these, but they are ill-served in others by goofy anachronisms, amorphous thematics, and over-curated set pieces. In what is probably the new hang's most self-conscious provocation, Faith Ringgold's *American People Series #20: Die* appears in a gallery consecrated to Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*, where it faces off against that primal scene of Cubism and fetishized masterpiece of MoMA's collection. The 1907 brothel picture and the 1967 tableau of blood-splattered turmoil make an awkward pair. There is no obvious reply to primitivism in Ringgold's work, whose billboard format and agonized figures draw on Picasso's much later *Guernica*. She painted *Die* in the year remembered for the "long, hot summer of 1967," when a wave of violent uprisings, spurred by festering racism, inequality, and police brutality, convulsed the United States. For Ringgold, the painting was a condensation of race and class conflict as well as a statement of a consciously and defiantly "black aesthetic" against the art-world etiquette of formal and political abstraction. At MoMA, however, the heavy-handed instrumentalization of *Die* as a rejoinder to *Femmes* serves to inoculate against the more troubling dynamics of Picasso's famous "exorcism picture." Critics have often described *Femmes*' attempt to capture and contain the threat of sexual and racial difference as a kind of apotropaic magic, but here it is Ringgold's work that is called on to cast a protective spell, shielding MoMA's investments in a canon it cannot securely defend on today's moral terrain.



Janet Sobel, *Milky Way*, 1945, enamel on canvas, 44 7/8 x 29 7/8".

There are forced conversations, but also missed encounters—moments where MoMA sits out the opportunity to question its reflexive hagiographies. Take, for example, the somewhat sheepish installation of self-taught artist Janet Sobel's *Milky Way*, 1945, in a room dedicated to museum architecture and exhibition design, where it hangs in a corner behind a cluster of amoeboid furniture made by Frederick Kiesler for Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century Gallery. The connection between these objects goes unmentioned: Guggenheim gave Sobel—a Ukrainian Jewish grandmother living in Brooklyn—a show in 1946. Her poured compositions predate Jackson Pollock's and are cited by none other than Clement Greenberg as a direct influence on his technique. Had *Milky Way*, with its tangled roulades of enamel paint, been shown near Pollock's *One: Number 31, 1950*, for instance, viewers would have been compelled to confront problems of gender, scale, and originality—problems absent in the untroubled installation of the AbEx masterpiece alongside works by Franz Kline, Clyfford Still, and David Smith. (In another corner of the gallery, a

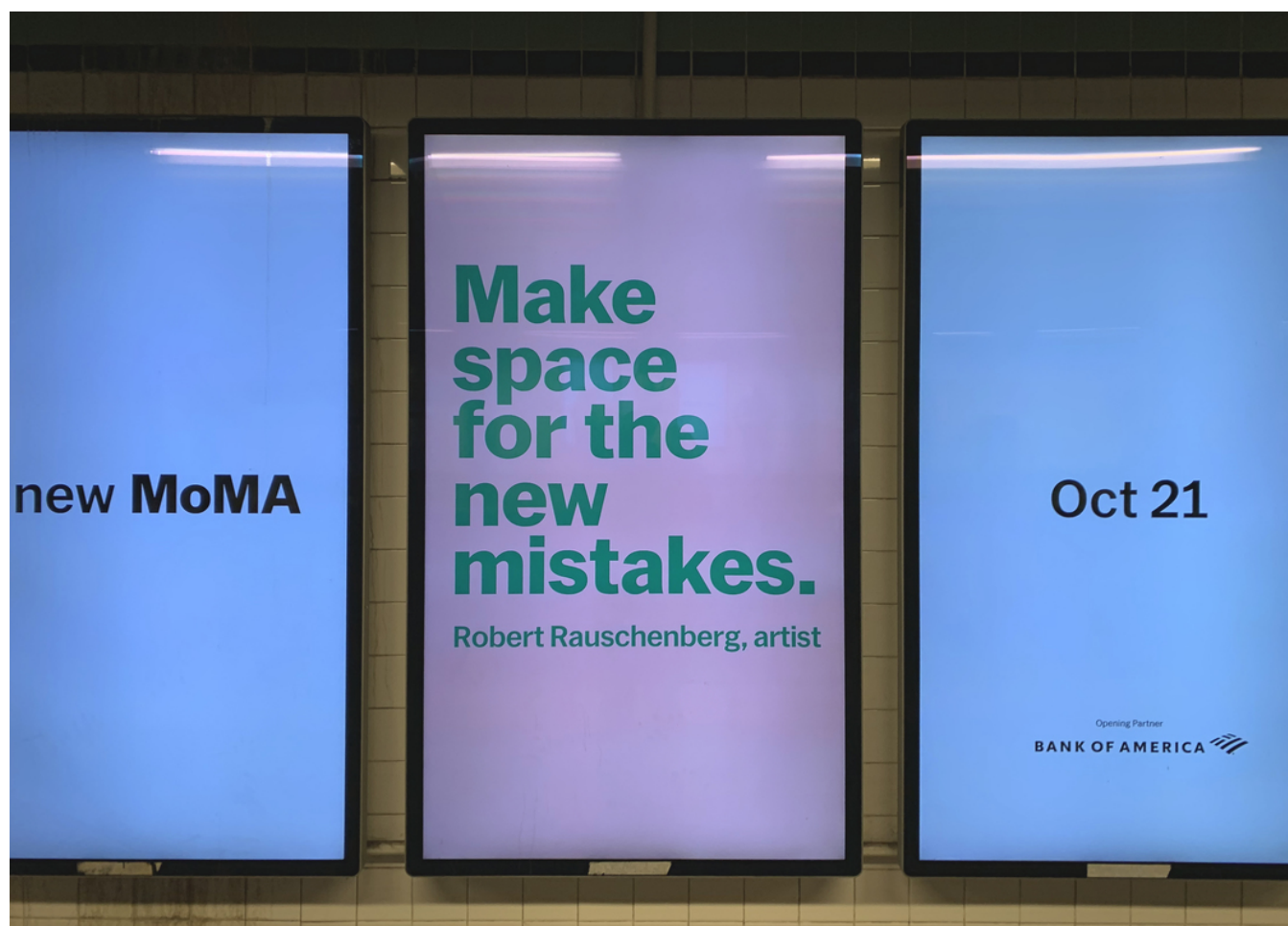
connubial encounter is staged between Pollock's *Number 1A*, 1948, and Lee Krasner's *Untitled*, 1949, but the pairing feels more orthodox than polemical).



Left: Mrinalini Mukherjee, *Yakshi*, 1984. Background: works from Geta Brătescu's "Medea's Hypostases" series, 1980. Right: Zofia Kulik, *The Splendor of Myself II*, 1997.

As the collection glides toward an uncertain present, there are more rooms devoted to individual projects (such as Gretchen Bender's pulsating capitalist fantasia *Dumping Core*, 1984, and Richard Serra's lumbering *Equal*, 2015) and more broadly thematic ones, with bleary names like "Inner and Outer Space" and "Worlds to Come." Something like a feminist gothic emerges in "Transfigurations," devoted to the reimagination of the female figure since the 1970s. Commanding the gallery is Mrinalini Mukherjee's *Yakshi*, 1984, a brooding, chain mail–like sculpture made from knotted gray fibers. It shares the floor with

the dark pop of Cady Noland's *Tanya as Bandit*, 1989—an aluminum cutout of a gun-toting Patty Hearst—and the sarcophagal beauty of Ana Mendieta's *Nile Born*, 1984, a sere, sand-covered indication of a female body. Highlights from the surrounding walls include works from the late Romanian Geta Brătescu's "Medea's Hypostases" series, 1980, their tender and viscous tracteries drawn with a sewing machine on scraps of her mother's clothing during Nicolae Ceaușescu's immiserating regime. Nearby hang photographs of Lorraine O'Grady performing as Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, turned out in a gown made from 180 pairs of white gloves and holding a whip festooned with white chrysanthemums. The ironic bite of the performance somehow cuts against and complements the polemical naïveté of Cecilia Vicuña's *Black Panther and Me (ii)*, 1978, where the artist deploys the flat, folkloric style of colonial portraiture to express solidarity with the Black Panther Party.



Subway advertisement for the New MoMA.

A piece of advice from Robert Rauschenberg features in the ubiquitous subway ads for MoMA's reopening: "Make space for the new mistakes." True to this spirit, MoMA's new collection galleries have a propositional rather than authoritative mood, appropriate given that one-third of their contents will be rotated every six months. This biannual shuffling of the deck is a recognition, per the museum, "that there is no single or complete history of modern and contemporary art," but also an artful kind of deferral. Without deeper informative texts and deeper collecting in its thinner areas, MoMA can gesture toward, but can't fully deliver on, the "deeper experience of art" it promises. Till then, beauty, novelty, and an elegant but limited cosmopolitanism will have to do.

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