

SFMOMA's new acquisitions an important drop in the bucket

Will the sale of a Mark Rothko painting make a difference in collection diversity?

Charles Desmarais | June 28, 2019 | Updated: June 29, 2019, 10:13 am



Frank Bowling, "Elder Sun Benjamin" (2018)
Photo: Katherine Du Tiel, © Artists Rights Society, New York

Neal Benezra would not be pinned down.

In February, the director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art granted an exclusive interview to The Chronicle. He was seated at a round table in his office, flanked by the museum's senior curator of painting and sculpture, Gary Garrels, and its two top professionals, Jill Lynch and Jennifer Northrop.

The topic was the **sale of a painting by Mark Rothko**, the proceeds of which were to be used “to broadly diversify SFMOMA’s collection,” a phrase used repeatedly by the museum and its representatives. But neither Benezra nor Garrels would share the museum’s collection goals with regard to diversity. Asked whether restrictions would be placed on use of the Rothko funds, Benezra simply said, “No.”

The work was **sold at Sotheby’s** in May for \$50.1 million, netting the museum \$42.8 million after commission and expenses. This week, **the museum announced its first 11 acquisitions**. More purchases will come later this year, and “a sizable amount” of the money will be set aside as an endowment to be called the Peggy Guggenheim Fund, recognizing the original donor of the Rothko painting.

So have the funds been used **to make a difference in the breadth of the collection** and its representation of frequently marginalized groups?

The short answer is, unquestionably. Just don’t ask how much this changes.

The newly acquired group of paintings and sculptures includes works by six women and at least six artists of color. At least two LGBTQ artists and three artists known for work they produced in Latin America are also included. Obviously, there is overlap, but none of the new acquisitions is by a straight white male.

The museum says there are approximately 2,400 paintings and sculptures among the museum’s 47,500 objects. Add to that some 835 Fisher Collection works, many of them very large, which **will continue to take up most of three floors of the museum** for another 97 years or more.

It’s a nudge on the surface, but 11 works do not make much of a dent.

Not all of the artists in the museum database are identified by gender and ethnicity, but of those who are, 28% are women and 10% are artists of color, SFMOMA says. (**An independent study** by a Williams College researcher, released this year, estimated female artists in the SFMOMA collection at 18.1%.)

Separating creative people into such categories is an odd way to make art decisions, you might say, and you would be right. But we have to start somewhere to correct the skewed image that we, through our mainstream institutions, have created of the history of art.

That's why I'm encouraged to see that six of the 11 works were made in or before 1960. The others are more contemporary, though only three were made in this century.



Leonora Carrington, "The Kitchen Garden on the Eyot" (1946)
Photo: © Estate of Leonora Carrington

I was granted access to the new works at the museum on Wednesday, June 26. On my tour through storage rooms and the conservation lab, Garrels and SFMOMA curator Janet Bishop provided informative running commentary on the rich provenance of many of the works. Bishop acknowledged the groundbreaking work of Whitney Chadwick, an art historian who lives in San Francisco, whose 1985 book "Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement" was an eye-opener for many.

Two choices, both with strong overtones of Surrealism, reflect Chadwick's influence. Leonora Carrington's "The Kitchen Garden on the Eyot" (1946) is a compact painting, less than 2 feet across, packed with mysterious allusion (starting with the title's obscure word for a small island). The work, which the museum now dedicates to Chadwick in its registration record, was first owned by the photographer and designer Sir Cecil Beaton, who purchased it from the prominent Pierre Matisse Gallery.



Kay Sage '44

Kay Sage, "Midnight Street" (1944)

Photo: © Estate of Kay Sage, Artists Rights Society, New York

“Midnight Street” (1944) by Kay Sage is another enigmatic small work, which may owe a debt to the well-known Surrealist painter Yves Tanguy, whom Sage married in 1940. It is bolder in form than most Tanguy works, however, a signal marker on the verge of a dark and broken desert floor.

Two related sculptures made in 1960 by Lygia Clark were purchased directly from members of the artist’s family. They are classic examples of so-called Neo-Concretism, a Brazilian art movement in which Clark played a central role. One of the two is a precariously balanced fold of cut and hinged sheet metal that appears to change from every aspect; the other is a handmade balsa wood maquette for the larger work. A third, intermediate version was purchased by board President Robert Fisher and is a promised gift to the museum.



Forrest Bess, "Seascape With Star"
Photo: © Estate of Forrest Bess

Forrest Bess was a visionary artist whose famously idiosyncratic sexual theories seem, somehow, to offer cues to his meditative landscapes. His tiny "Seascape With Star" was painted around 1949, Garrels surmised. A flesh-colored sea roils with blood-red waves, under a sky of solid black. An inscription on the back is likely a reference to the visions Bess claimed were the source of his imagery. "There was a variation," the artist wrote. "The star turned into a sun with many satellites. ... It will not be painted."



Norman Lewis, "Twilight" (1956)
Photo: © Estate of Norman Lewis

SFMOMA adds substantially to the representation of African American artists in its collection with this group of works. Paintings by at least four artists of African heritage are included, including a classic 1956 work by Norman Lewis, "Twilight," a semi-abstract landscape rich in blacks and browns, disturbed by the faintest cracks of light.





Alma Thomas, “Cumulus” (1972)

Photo: Katherine Du Tiel, © Estate of Alma Thomas

“Cumulus” (1972) by Alma Thomas is a 6-foot-high cascade of light and – atypically, from what I know of her work – pastel color. Garrels positively gushed over the painting, but here is a case where greater depth in holdings of a single artist would help us make better sense of the career.

If ever one needed a lesson in the inadequacy of reproduction of works of art, they would do well to compare the printed page to the painting “Elder Sun Benjamin” (2018), by Frank Bowling. At 17 feet long and 10 feet high, it is majestic in scale, and its vivid stripes of blue, yellow and red are turbulently handworked up close. Other details are nearly lost, as well. Strips of the Dutch cloth popular in parts of Africa separate the work’s three sectors; stencils of what appear to be ornate brackets adorn the upper blue field, as if to support the painting from the top; one of a pair of window-like circles near the center holds a barely visible photograph of the artist’s grown “sun.”



Mickalene Thomas, "Qusuquzah, une très belle négresse 1" (2011)
Photo: © Mickalene Thomas, Artists Rights Society, New York

A 2011 painting by Mickalene Thomas, 8 feet high and adorned with rhinestones, is similarly deceptive in a photograph. It is a portrait of the formidable Qusuquzah, “a very beautiful Negress,” the title tells us, and a frequent subject for Thomas.

Two later works, “Tarpaulin No. 1” (2018), a ceramic sculpture by the Canadian indigenous artist Rebecca Belmore, and an untitled painting from about 1993 by San Francisco “Mission School” artist Barry McGee, round out the group. Neither was available for viewing. The Belmore is impossible to decipher from the reference photograph provided to me. It was included in a retrospective exhibition of her work at Toronto’s Art Gallery of Ontario.



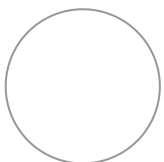


Barry McGee, Untitled (1993)
Photo: © Barry McGee

The McGee, a partial gift and purchase from Darryl Smith, the co-founder of San Francisco's beloved Luggage Store Gallery, is a fragment from a larger work included in one of McGee's first museum exhibitions. The artist honed his style on the streets of the Bay Area, and this early work exemplifies the bold forms of his graffiti writing. It is fitting that Smith saw the work from his car, rescuing it, he said in a phone call, for \$75 from a sidewalk sale.

The newly acquired works will go on view in August, "threaded through the collection" on various floors of the museum, according to Garrels.

UPDATE: Details regarding the provenance of the Barry McGee work have been corrected.



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