

Walker's collection regrouped by theme: [METRO Edition]

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Rehanging a museum's permanent collection is like shuffling a deck of cards: a useful gesture but not the heart of the game. Buying art, staging new shows, discovering masterpieces - those are the key plays in the museum business.

But how a museum displays what it owns reveals a great deal about the institution - not only what it is, but also how it thinks about the past and aspires to the future. By that criterion, Walker Art Center has unveiled a new persona in its permanent collection galleries, which, after redesign and configuration by Chicago architect John Vinci, reopened Tuesday.

Occupying three of the museum's nine galleries, the installation offers a casual, almost offhand, view of 20th-century art. In place of a historical sweep from the 1920s to yesterday, it offers thematically arranged alcoves presenting "Portraits, Plots and Places." It is an installation short on art history and long on juxtapositions of work from different decades, styles, philosophies and temperaments. Many familiar works have been shipped off to storage, and the galleries are emptier than usual. What is shown comes from a wider range of media than before - not only paintings, sculpture and prints but also films and video.

As the first major reshuffling of the collection since the retirement last year of long-time Walker director Martin Friedman, the show says more about its organizers - senior Walker curator Gary Garrels and director Kathy Halbreich - than it does about 20th-century art.

"What we've tried to do is let each piece have its own voice, free of the prescriptive narrative of art history," Garrels said as he supervised the hanging of several large paintings last week.

Jettisoning art history is a fundamental change and, in light of the deficiencies in the Walker's collection, probably a smart one. Although the museum owns a number of acknowledged 20th-century masterpieces - notably Franz Marc's "Blue Horses" and a superb selection of 1960s minimalist sculpture - it owns no paintings by Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Mondrian, Kandinsky, Magritte or Pollock, to name only some of the most obvious.

The new installation avoids calling attention to the absence of those masters by offering "plots" and subplots instead. The first such plot is color, a natural choice given the importance of pure, raw hue in 20th-century painting. This is the weakest section of the new installation - an odd lot of mismatched, unrelated, not very colorful paintings and one sculpture. With the exception of Ellsworth Kelly's vivid green sculpture, Marc's symbolically blue horses and a vivid cubist figure by Stanton MacDonald-Wright, these are exceedingly odd choices to illustrate the theme - unless by "color" the curators mean brown.

Joseph Stella's "American Landscape" of 1929 is a tribute to the brute beauty of American technology - specifically the Brooklyn Bridge - executed primarily in bold slashes of black. Lyonel Feininger's "Church of the Minorites" (1926) is a glowing but somber cubist study. The more contemporary pieces include an indifferently colored Kenneth Noland target, a huge Morris Louis abstraction that resembles a tobacco-stained tooth, and several stages in the development of a lovely Helen Frankenthaler print.

None of these even hints at the exuberance and subtlety with which artists from Matisse and Robert Delaunay to color theorist Josef Albers and Pop pornographer Tom Wesselman have manipulated color.

An adjacent room of Mark Rothko paintings is not much more successful. The Walker is proud of owning several paintings by Rothko, the foremost Abstract Expressionist of the post-World War II period. Unfortunately, they are not the great canvases on which the artist's reputation as a colorist rests. Instead of the vast, brooding fields of mulberry and black or the dusty, all-embracing expanses of red, gold or green for which Rothko is known, these are midsized, somewhat muddy canvases. And his more interesting surrealist works from the 1940s contribute little to the dialogue about color.

The Walker curators find firmer footing in a gallery devoted to portraits, which they define broadly to include depictions of specific people and symbolic abstractions.

The range - from Joseph Beuys's felt suit to Andy Warhol's "16 Jackies," from Alberto Giacometti's bronze sculpture of his hawk-nosed brother to Susan Rothenberg's abstract painting of a horse - compels viewers to reexamine the whole idea of portraiture. Each piece probes a different facet of the human personality, from the public image implied by Beuys's suit to the private self exemplified by Rothenberg's horse. The installation also spotlights a wonderful recent gift to the museum: a powerful drawing by Willem de Kooning of a voracious, rageful woman who seems capable of devouring everything else in the room.

The juxtaposition of abstract and figurative art - a subtext throughout the installation - is especially apparent in Gallery 5, where a minimalist cube by Donald Judd holds forth with a bronze "sidewalk" by Carl Andre.

Here again, the curators have tossed art history aside by plunking a large orange Barnett Newman canvas in their midst. Although Newman pioneered the pared-down aesthetic for which the minimalists later became famous, he is historically linked with an earlier generation of abstract painters who aspired to embody ethereal, quasi-religious emotions in paint.

By quietly knocking the rhetorical foundation out from under Newman and his cohorts, this installation invites viewers to examine the paintings for themselves. In this context the spare geometry of the minimalist works takes on a new, almost sublime poetry, too, especially as exemplified in Fred Sandback's elegant shadow drawing. Sandback's work, not previously shown at the Walker, is made with the most minimal of means: a cord stretched into a square across a corner of the room.

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In contrast, the adjacent gallery offers a series of emotionally evocative paintings and sculptures plus a droll video installation by Minnesota artist Bruce Charlesworth and a photo series by Carrie Mae Weems. The sexually charged atmosphere of Edward Hopper's painting "Office at Night" is a perfect counterpoint to the desultory seediness of George Segal's sculpture "Diner." The existential loneliness in both works is carried further in Weems' rather didactic triptych of a noncommunicative black couple and Edward and Nancy Kienholz's poignant sculpture of his mother contemplating her youthful self.

Fine groupings of sculpture by Louise Nevelson and Richard Artschwager are followed by a breathtaking display of predominantly European art in the final gallery. Two epic paintings by Anselm Kiefer dominate the room with their grandiloquent musings on the ruins of Germany and the German soul. In a particularly nice bit of curatorial planning, the Kiefers' somber gold and putty hues echo eloquently in the spare lines of a Brice Marden canvas dominating the preceding gallery.

Cultural fragmentation, social disintegration, linguistic exploration and a variety of conceptual concerns are offered in the last section, which includes works by sculptors Siah Armajani and Janis Kounellis, painters Mark Tansey, Chuck Close and Jasper Johns and conceptualist Marcel Broodthaers, and a film by Irish artist James Coleman based on footage of a 1927 Jack Dempsey boxing match.

As a first foray into defining a new Walker Art Center for the last decade of the 20th century, this installation is noteworthy for what it is not. It is not a seamless gloss on the past, nor a celebration of masterpieces from the archives. Instead it is an open-ended inquiry suggesting that fresh interpretations can be found even in old familiar forms.