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## A Wing Where Contemporary Art Can Converse

By KEN JOHNSON

Last weekend, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, celebrated the opening of its new [Linde Family Wing for Contemporary Art](#), which would seem to represent a major commitment to collecting and exhibiting the art of our time. It should be noted, however, that the new wing is not actually new. It is the old, I. M. Pei-designed wing from 1981, formerly used for rotating exhibitions, now refurbished, repurposed and renamed. And while a lot more contemporary art is now on view, you don't get the feeling that the old, small-city provincialism has been replaced by a new, fiercely ambitious cosmopolitanism.

The main attraction is a 12,000-square-foot, oblong gallery, a big-box space occupied by a sprawling, uneven, crowded hodge-podge of about 240 works from the museum's permanent collection, augmented by some blue-chip loans.

There is a beautiful moment in one part of the installation: a rhombus-shaped polyptych by Ellsworth Kelly creates a rainbow spectrum that seems to recede into virtual space. Nearby stands a narrow stele painted in shades of purple by [Anne Truitt](#). A ball of matte stainless steel by [Roni Horn](#) rests on the floor. To the right hangs Ed Ruscha's elegiac image of a rural fence under a gray sky intended to resemble a scratchy, noir movie frame. On the far opposite wall, a sumptuous, black-on-red Warhol painting of an electric chair presides like a bad conscience. A black polyhedron evoking a futuristic tombstone by Tony Smith completes a tableau that is as poetic as it is formally elegant.

As a whole, however, the exhibition underscores the challenge that Edward Saywell, chairman of the contemporary art department, and Jen Mergel, chief curator, face: There are too many gaps in the collection to create a credible representation of recent art history. So they opted for a thematic approach. The gallery is divided into five sections, each devoted to a different elementary topic. Regrettably the themes sound as if they were conceived by the education department to persuade the uninitiated that art is fun.

Under the heading "Art can

be..." the first section includes works by Picasso, Morris Louis, Lynda Benglis and Richard Tuttle among others. It speaks to the unlimited formal possibilities of today's art. At the start a framed card from 1961 certifies that the conceptualist [Piero Manzoni](#), has signed the body of one Mario Diacono (a longtime Boston curator and a local hero) and thereby turned him into a work of art. A beaded curtain by [Felix Gonzalez-Torres](#) ushers visitors into the next gallery, where you will find — in addition to the arrangement around Mr. Kelly's spectrum painting — a punchy, feminist word-and-picture montage by Barbara Kruger and a mannequin wearing a paper dress bearing a pattern of Campbell's Soup labels. Here the question is, "What's it about?" In other words, art is about, well, lots of different things.

Next, "Quote? Copy? Update?" deals with Postmodernist appropriation. It features Sherrie Levine's [photograph of a book reproduction](#) of a Walker Evans photograph, a big Cindy Sherman photograph that mimics high-end fashion photography and [Louise Lawler's](#) photograph of an Impressionist exhibition, in which [Monet's "La Japonaise"](#) hovers on the wall behind Degas's "Little Dancer." The Monet, as it happens, is owned by the museum. The life-size portrait of the artist's wife in a Japanese costume from 1876 now hangs awkwardly next to Ms. Lawler's picture. It looks as if it doesn't know what it is doing here.

"Familiar-Altered" addresses various sorts of realism, from [Mona Hatoum's](#) folding screen composed of greatly enlarged cheese graters to a mural by Kara Walker in which silhouetted figures enact a surrealist dream about Antebellum plantation life. "How is it made?" includes a golden tapestry of flattened liquor-bottle tops by [El Anatsui](#) and [Josiah McElheny's](#) big cube of mirrored glass with windows on all sides revealing rows of hand-blown glass bottles backed by mirrors that multiply them infinitely.

Interesting dialogues between various pieces happen here and there. A Donald Judd sculpture (on loan) consisting of shiny purple, boxes, hanging from a wall in a vertical stack, converses with Mr. McElheny's mirrored box, for example. But placing a semi-circular arch of doll-size clothes handmade by [Charles LeDray](#) in the same area adds something unproductively dissonant. That happens too often throughout the exhibition, giving it a cluttered, aimless feel. It needs a stronger philosophy to show and tell how it is that so many seemingly different kinds of art can be taken seriously at this moment.

More promising is a small, black-box gallery carved out of the big space for video, where short pieces by Sigalit Landau, Kate Gilmore and the team of Ann Carlson and Mary Ellen Strom are now showing. To create a comprehensive archive of video art is conceptually and fiscally doable.

In light of the confusing congestion of the permanent collection display, it is a relief to enter the first-floor gallery reserved for temporary exhibitions, where "Ellsworth Kelly: Wood Sculpture" now resides. It is a spare, perfectly installed presentation of 19 near-Minimalist works in various more or less exotic woods produced by Mr. Kelly from 1958 to 1996. Tall slabs with gently curving sides stand on their own while reliefs composed of curves, and straight lines hang on the walls. Natural wood grain modifies abstract severity to soothingly decorous if not galvanizing effect.

Will the museum make itself a destination for the international, contemporary art cognoscenti? Right now the odds don't look great, but things may change for the better as the curators become accustomed to their expanded mission. So let the inexhaustibly inventive painter and concrete poet Kay Rosen have the last word. On a 120-foot long atrium wall, she has created a mural of giant yellow letters on a black field spelling the almost-palindrome, "Manana Man," or in English "Tomorrow, man."

*The Linde Family Wing for Contemporary Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 465 Huntington Avenue, (617) 267-9300, mfa.org.*

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