

Helping the Modern Get Over Itself

By [ROBERTA SMITH](#).

The permanent collection of any great museum is in a state of constant, usually subtle flux. Works go up, are shifted about and later removed from view, making way for others. Often such changes pass all but unnoticed. But occasionally the adjustments are more pronounced and widespread, achieving a kind of critical mass and creating a different sense of the institution, its holdings and its possibilities.

Over the past few months changes of this kind have been unfolding in some of the most hallowed and closely watched galleries in the world: those that the Museum of Modern Art devotes to its unparalleled collection of painting and sculpture. The displays in many of these spaces, which occupy the museum's fourth and fifth floors, have been rejiggered or completely rethought. Taken together they make for a fascinating museum experience — not without flaws, certainly, but charged with a promising spirit of inclusiveness and flexibility and dotted with unfamiliar works and juxtapositions.

These changes are largely the work of Ann Temkin, who arrived at the museum in 2003 and became chief curator of painting and sculpture in 2008, one of very few to hold the job. They constitute the strongest sign yet of her approach to the permanent collection and were accomplished in collaboration with five other curators: Anne Umland, Leah Dickerman and Laura Hoptman, also of the painting and sculpture department; Connie Butler, chief curator of drawings; and Christophe Cherix, chief curator of prints and illustrated books.

You might say that Ms. Temkin and her team are trying to help the Modern get over itself, to play down its role as anointer and definer and keeper of the canon, and to soften its historic focus on linearity, male genius and art movements (or at least strictly defined ones) while excavating exciting, little-seen treasure from deep storage. A very un-Modern-like phrase appears in wall texts at the start of both the fourth and fifth floors, telling us "there are countless ways to explore the history of modern art and the museum's rich collection."

The reinstallation is most thorough-going in the fourth-floor galleries, devoted to art since 1940. Here, at the end of April, Ms. Temkin was presented for the first time in her tenure with a clean slate: empty galleries that had to be installed from scratch following the close of "Abstract Expressionist New York: The Big Picture," the seven-month blowout of Abstract Expressionist works from the Modern's collection that she mounted last fall. It was a rare opportunity to do something different, and something different has been done.

You can feel the change at the beginning of the fourth-floor galleries, where the lead-off work is "Sleeping Figure," a dark totemic sculpture from 1950 by Louise Bourgeois, stationed before an empty wall typically hung with a painting by Jackson Pollock or some other high-ranking Abstract Expressionist. Bourgeois's attention to Surrealism is seconded by a large tangle of wood and rope evoking an anchor and crucifix by Frederick Kiesler; the red squirming doodles of André Masson's painting "The Kill"; and works by Wifredo Lam, Leonora Carrington and Yves Tanguy.

You can feel the change even more at the end, in a progression of works of Conceptual Art, many of them recently acquired. With this array the permanent collection galleries, which have usually concluded with the art of the late 1960s, push, if gingerly, to 1980 for the first time.

And you can feel it too in a gallery devoted entirely to the feminist video and installation work of Hannah Wilke, not exactly a regular in the Modern's canon.

The Conceptual Art finale in particular will not be everyone's cup of tea; it's not mine, and there are other galleries where the groupings don't yet jell. But this installation is, more than its predecessors, a work in progress, an attempt to think in new ways.

Each gallery has a clear and different focus, but there is a consistent tendency to favor groupings of works tightly related by time or place. The third gallery, usually a bastion of Abstract Expressionism, is now devoted to seven works by Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly and Jasper Johns. Five were made within months of one another in 1954 and 1955, when the artists were all living in close proximity in Lower Manhattan. (Since Abstract Expressionism just had so much time in the sun — and since most of that show is currently on tour — it is in short supply here.)



The fourth gallery, concentrating on works from the 1960s, abounds with discordant reliefs, assemblages, collages and found-object sculptures by Lee Bontecou, John Chamberlain, Yayoi Kusama, Arman, Daniel Spoerri and Jacques de la Villiglé. Christo's 1963 "Package in Wheelbarrow," an old standard of the wrapped kind, has not been out in years. Natsuyuki Nakanishi's "Compact Object" from 1962 — a Brancusi-like ovoid of cast resin filled with watch parts — will be new to most visitors, as will a small, vehement reliclike synthesis of nails, metal foil and iron on wood from 1959 by the German artist Mathias Goeritz. The gallery feels like an explosion, and of materials rather than styles: nothing here qualifies as traditional painting or sculpture.

Style returns but in elasticized versions in the next two galleries. Pop is expanded to include Alex Katz and Marisol, along with its primary British practitioner, Richard Hamilton, although it would have been great to see Romare Bearden's "Patchwork Quilt," which appeared on an early version of the checklist but not in the galleries. (While female artists are gratifying plentiful, black ones are all but absent.) An especially bold-looking gallery juxtaposes the Minimalist efforts of the New Yorkers Donald Judd, Dan Flavin and Jo Baer and the Angelenos Craig Kaufmann, John McCracken and DeWain Valentine, whose big "Triple Disk Red Metal Flake — Black Edge" (another recent acquisition) suggests a bit of abstracted farm machinery.

But after this Ms. Temkin and her team might almost be following Douglas Crimp's incendiary essay "The End of Painting," published in October magazine in 1981, to the letter, perhaps more closely than Mr. Crimp would follow it these days. The installation echoes his point that painting is withering and also shows the art object all but disappearing. A white-on-white canvas by Robert Ryman and four small painted panels by Blinky Palermo share a gallery with Conceptualists like Lawrence Weiner and Hanne Darboven.

Next, Frank Stella's 1959 hallmark of reductivism, the black-banded "Marriage of Reason and Squalor" hangs in solitary splendor amid wall and floor sculptures by Lynda Benglis, Richard Serra, Eva Hesse, Bruce Nauman and Giovanni Anselmo. A gallery lined with the striped awning-fabric paintings of Daniel Buren, a hero of Mr. Crimp's article, all but announces, "Kiss painting goodbye!" From here on, it is a fairly strict diet of Conceptual or Process Art works composed primarily of texts and photos, among them pieces by Vito Acconci, Jan Dibbets, Gordon-Matta Clark, James Lee Byars, On Kawara, Dennis Oppenheim and Ger Van Elk, with a great deal of space devoted to works by the overrated Belgian Conceptualist Marcel Broodthaers.

This conclusion is something of a downer because it feels more homogeneous and exclusive than much of what came before. But a tremendous amount of ground has been covered, often freshly, and a new sense of fluidity established. A reference in those opening text panels to "an ongoing program of periodic reinstallations" suggests that, more than in the past, we should expect the unexpected, and new levels of turnover, in the years ahead.

Interestingly, this possibility is reinforced on the fifth floor — primarily work from 1880 to 1940 — where, in three galleries, Ms. Temkin and her team have waded into the stream of masterpieces and taken more marked liberties with time and style.

In Gallery 10, usually reserved for the extensive holdings in Mondrian, the curators have used just two of his paintings (including "Broadway Boogie Woogie," 1942-43) to anchor geometric paintings and sculptures from late 1950s and early '60s by the Europeans Joseph Albers and Max Bill and the South Americans Lygia Clark, Alejandro Otero and the excellent Willys de Castro's "Active Object" of 1961. This slim wood column, elegantly sectioned in red and white, is a marvel of expanded perception.

Next door, in Gallery 11, the display segues from the geometric to the biomorphic with works by Ben Nicholson, Jean Arp, Sophie Tauber-Arp, Barbara Hepworth, Meret Oppenheim, Alexander Calder and Giacometti. A late Brancusi, the regal "Fish" of 1930, indicates the precedent for this lively selection, where nearly everything is from the same inter-war decade, 1929-39.

And then there's the small, wonderfully dense Gallery 4, loosely devoted to still life with works from 1915 to the early 1950s. My favorite on either floor right now, this selection juxtaposes paintings by Matisse, Braque and Giorgio Morandi with surprises by, among others, the American outsider Forrest Bess, Bernard Buffet (French), Gertrude Green (American), Emilio Pettoruti (Argentine) and Amelia Peláez Del Casal (Cuban). The Del Casal, "Fishes," was painted in 1943 under the spell of Picasso (and acquired the following year), but it definitely has a mind of its own. A large vitrine astutely contrasts small sculptures by Mr. Johns, Rauschenberg, Duchamp, Arp, Giacometti and Lawrence Vail. The Vail is a bristling, seldom-seen assemblage ceramic bottle given to the museum from the formidable [Peggy Guggenheim](#).

The artworks in Gallery 4 range across time and geography but resonate among themselves with amazing alacrity. They offer exhilarating proof that the museum's acquisitions have always prepared it to tell a more encompassing view of history than has often been its wont, while further emphasizing the tragedy that its recent expansion did not expand the painting and sculpture galleries much at all. Still, they give us a version of the Modern that we don't see enough: free, digging deep and thinking hard, foremost with the eyes. It speeds the heart to imagine more of these galleries ascending to this level of taut and reciprocal illumination.