

M.I.A. at SFMOMA

Timothy Buckwalter | Feb 04, 2008 | KQED Arts

Let's take a quick run through "Matisse and Beyond," the rotating exhibition of selections from SFMOMA's permanent collection. Or maybe a brisk walk -- I'm pretty sure running is still not allowed in the museum.

The first two galleries one enters feature the beginnings of 20th Century art in Europe -- Fauvism, Dada, and Cubism. When you look around, please notice that all the paintings and sculptures are by men.

The third gallery offers the murmurings of early 20th Century art in America -- a few Precisionists, some Modernists and two pieces by Georgia O'Keeffe. This would also be the home to the Museum's two Frida Kahlo paintings, but they are currently out on loan.

Next up are the galleries that house mostly pre-WW2 art from America and Europe -- Surrealism, the beginnings of Abstract Expressionism and more Surrealism. It's a room that evokes that odd, super-sexualized moment in art that happened right before Germany got ambitious. By the way, no women artists are found here either.

Now we come to my favorite part of Matisse and Beyond, the room full of AbEx'ers. The Rothko is king of this gallery. There's an anorexic Giacometti sculpture, perhaps to remind you that the Abstract Expressionists were reacting to the War to End All Wars. Wait, slow down, you almost missed a painting by Joan Mitchell. One of the best post-war painters -- and she's female.

Alright, we've just crossed the half-way point, and we've only seen work from two women artists. Hurry up, there must be more women artists on view somewhere in here. After all the 20th Century gave us Jackson Pollock, but it also gave us Lee Krasner.

A few paces more lead us through the shrine to the behemoth abstract struggles slathered together by Clyfford Still. No women artists are allowed in. Nor men for that matter. Still's deal with the museum states that he gets the room to himself.

Now into two galleries of work from the '60s -- Neo-Dada, Pop Art, Minimalism and the seeds of Performance and Conceptual art. As you leave the last of the two rooms you might notice the silvery Andy Warhol silkscreen of Elizabeth Taylor. How about that -- an image of woman on a horse, made by a man. You might also notice -- I sure did -- that for two consecutive rooms, there were no women artists on view.

Now we stumble into the '80s and '90s galleries, the last two rooms of Matisse and Beyond. Immediately on the left, a Kiki Smith bronze wall sculpture welcomes you. Further in is a Vija Celmins painting of a warplane. On your right, an amazing painting by Kerry James Marshall

sings its way off the wall. Over there are two sculptural busts by Janine Antoni, beautifully understated but creepy (like the Smith, in a good way) and a quartet of drawings from SECA winner Rosana Castrillo Diaz. In front of you is Fire, an installation by Teresita Fernandez, that seems to be getting in a fist fight for your attention with Jim Hodge's gargantuan sculpture No Betweens.

And with that, Matisse and Beyond comes to a screeching halt. You've just seen 130 pieces of art, twelve of them by eight women artists, which works out to less than one in ten pieces.

If you think this simply reflects the demographics of the modern art world, you've been duped by SFMOMA. This does not reflect the art of the 20th Century. There were, in fact, more than a handful of women making museum-worthy art in the last hundred years.

Janet Bishop, curator in charge of Matisse and Beyond, emails, "The historical portion of SFMOMA's collection, like other modern collections, is definitely skewed toward work by men, which reflects the broader exhibiting and collecting patterns of the art world over the course of too much of the 20th century."

"But," Bishop continues, "fortunately, in recent decades, the situation has changed quite a lot. Women have a much greater prominence in the art world now, curators are more aware of issues of representation, and a much higher percentage of work by women now enters the collection every year."

For instance, Bishop points out that this year, SFMOMA acquired the Fernandez and Antoni sculptures as well as a Louise Lawler piece (I'm a big fan) and a huge installation by Ann Hamilton. As a matter of fact, in 2007, the painting and sculpture department purchased work by 10 women and 11 men.

It would seem we are living in a brighter tomorrow.

But why then has SFMOMA acknowledged that their collection of pre-Watergate art reflects a male-centric collecting pattern and let it go at that? We are constantly revising and reinterpreting history to fit the ideas of the day. Does the museum really want to continue to flaunt its mistakes?

An email from Frida Kahlo of the Guerilla Girls, one of the spokeswomen for the art movement recently responsible for gains in equal representation for women artists, notes that the problem has been longstanding here. "We haven't focused on the SF museums for a while but when we did, back in the 1980s, we found that the SFMOMA was the worst on the West Coast for showing women artists. We always liked saying that 'Things were better for women artists in the West, except for San Francisco.'"

There are two very simple solutions to SFMOMA's seemingly-sexist quandary. Either one, when implemented, would help make the place the world-class museum The City deserves.

The first answer is the most expensive and least likely to happen. The acquisitions committee could go out to market and pick up more historic pieces by women. Mary Cassatt, Sonia Delaunay, Lee Krasner and Suzanne Valadon are still going for less money than their male counterparts.

An easier answer to SFMOMA's embarrassing dilemma is for Janet Bishop to go to their warehouse and dig up more pieces by women artists and put them on view. Pieces from Helen Lundeberg, Helen Torr, Helen Phillips or Anne Bremer -- all would look terrific in the early 20th Century Americans.

Why not give that Rothko a breather and mix some more women in with Joan Mitchell? Nell Stinton, Helen Frankenthaler and Agnes Martin would strike up a fascinating conversation with Mitchell.

The Surrealists could certainly use something from Barbara Hepworth or Mary Callery. They might even enjoy a real kick in the pants from Meret Oppenheim's Miss Gardenia.

Why not break up the man-minefield of art that has Warhol's National Velvet holding it together with something from Eva Hesse, Alice Baber, Joe Baer or African American abstractionist Ellen Banks?

Last but not least, SFMOMA must consider hanging, somewhere, works from three Bay Area icons: Jay DeFeo, Joan Brown and Amy Flemming. These San Franciscans wrestled with their craft, and came out victorious. They need to be celebrated equally with the Clyfford Stills and David Park.

Hey SFMOMA, we're getting on this kinda late, but how about this for a new year's resolution? A more equitable view of women artists in Matisse and Beyond. You can do it -- you've already got the goods.