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Review: SFMoMA's Expansion Sets a New Standard for Museums

By **ROBERTA SMITH** MAY 13, 2016

SAN FRANCISCO — The big white crinkly addition that the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#) opened on Saturday bumps this widely respected institution into a new league, possibly one of its own. Designed by the Norwegian firm [Snohetta](#), led by Craig Dykers, the new \$305 million 10-story addition to the five-story Mario Botta building is a beautiful thing that promises to work as well.

It nearly triples the gallery space while raising museum standards for synergy between interior and exterior; between art viewing and viewer comfort; and between galleries and circulation. The new building's rippling, sloping facade, rife with subtle curves and bulges, establishes a brilliant alternative to the straight-edged boxes of traditional modernism and the rebellion against them initiated by Frank Gehry, with his computer-inspired acrobatics. Mainly, it reminds us that the horizontal and vertical grids of the city can be disrupted without being destroyed.

The museum has opened with a sometimes numbing panoply of 19 inaugural exhibitions, with a total of 1,900 works designed to show off its greatly expanded collection. Highlights include paintings by Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner and Francis Bacon; sculpture by artists like Charles Ray; and a gallery's worth of photographs by Diane Arbus.

The cornucopia of new or newly promised gifts includes a cache that is neither: the 1,100-work postwar collection — of which a selection of 260 is on view — accumulated by Donald and Doris Fisher, founders of the Gap, who had once considered building a private museum. In 2009, their holdings were lent to the museum for 100 years, which is also a bump up of some kind, although the collection is entirely too white, male and blue-chip, and comes with stipulations that may prove restrictive.

The project was led by [Neal Benezra](#), the museum's director; [Gary Garrels](#), senior curator of painting and sculpture, and Ruth Berson, a deputy director who oversaw the architectural expansion.

The West Coast Modern is not only bigger than the Museum of Modern Art in New York, it is poised — with concerted diversifying — to do for the late 20th and 21st centuries what its East Coast cousin did for the art of the late 19th and early 20th.

This feeling is strongest in parts of the Fisher Collection display, where Mr. Garrels has devoted handsomely installed, often intimate galleries to works by individual Minimalists and German Neo-Expressionists, among them Carl Andre, Gerhard Richter, Georg Baselitz, Brice Marden, Agnes Martin, Anselm Kiefer and especially Ellsworth Kelly, who is represented by what is essentially a four-gallery survey of his career.

Similar accumulations occur elsewhere, with Richard Serra's early works (several from the Fishers) and a multimedia roundup of Nam June Paik (from the Hakuta family). One gallery in the "Open-Ended" exhibition, home to the core works from the permanent collection, nearly explodes with six majestic paintings by Clyfford Still, a gift from the artist in 1975.

Beyond the galleries, the Snohetta's interior attractions are many: a multipurpose performance space, two restaurants and a spacious third floor reserved almost entirely for the museum's exemplary photography collection (with a coffee bar in its midst), and terraces for viewing sculpture. Amphitheater seating overlooks the new Howard Street entrance, whose lobby holds, just barely, an enormous spiraling sculpture by Mr. Serra that is part of the Fisher Collection.

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The facade is supposedly inspired by the waters and mists of San Francisco Bay, but its associations are free-range, variously artificial and natural. It conjures an iceberg, a pueblo and an exceptional cruise ship, but also seems pleated, hand-carved and digital. (It could also be an enormous cloth Anachrome painting by Piero Manzoni.) The exterior stimulates sight, mind and imagination, readying you for the unpredictable pleasures and demands inside.

Once you're there, this subtle flexing of the senses continues, stimulated not just by the art but also by the continual surprises of the building's design and details. Nothing really repeats, exactly, most excitingly in the broad corridors along the building's east facade, where staircases alternate with big windows. These offer panoramic views, while their thick frames echo the light wood flooring and provide wonderfully deep window seats. The interplay of geometry, material, light, space and angle of view relates to installation art and is one of the building's hallmarks.

The main flaw of the Snohetta building may be that the San Francisco Modern's 1995 structure was not demolished to make way for it. In a feeble attempt at unification, Snohetta replaced the original black granite staircase with a wider one in light wood, but the Third Street lobby retains its black floor and its ridiculous full-height atrium. Outside, the symmetrical Botta building now sits before its larger, softer-looking sibling like a pharaonic gate.

Still, the Botta building offers exceptional galleries, now refurbished, and Snohetta took care to knit the levels inside the structures almost seamlessly.

The predominance of new arrivals means that most of the shows are, above all, thank you notes to donors. Prominent artists like Gerhard Richter and Jasper Johns appear more than once, as do local heroes like David Park and Lynn Hershman Leeson. These repetitions may make even noncurators itch to bring together all the efforts of a given artist and stash some in storage.

The profusion of new art is anchored by the "Open-Ended" exhibition, which returns to view beloved standards like the clutch of Fauvist Matisses; a lively Surrealist collection, with numerous Joseph Cornells and a great early Dalí; and Rauschenberg's "Automobile Tire Print" (1953). Recent purchases include "Three Men," a great Romare Bearden collage acquired in 2012.

The three-gallery show of postwar art from Northern California that follows feels skimpy and also outmoded in its cloistering, although a room of San Francisco Conceptual Art makes sense. Five works by the cerebral William T. Wiley (who influenced Bruce Nauman) is a bit much when there is nothing by the raucous Roy DeForest. **But the main promised gift here, a large 1953 triptych by the abstract painter Lee Mullican, is a knockout.**

The non-Fisher Campaign for Art on the fourth floor offers many prizes: "Bushbaby," a recent masterpiece by Johns; [Krasner's "Four"](#) (1957), modest in size but big in its compressed, tumbling forms; an amazing trove of drawings by Joseph Beuys; and a cast of Picasso's landmark bronze, "Head of a Woman," from 1909, his first attempt at Cubism in three dimensions.

Five shows are devoted to the Fisher Collection alone, perhaps most stupendously, a group of nearly a dozen Calder mobiles and wall pieces in the new Motion Lab gallery on 3. Most of the remaining works are displayed in galleries named for the Fishers that fill nearly three floors of the Snohetta building. The problems with the collection are its unalloyed mainstream focus, which may widen as other holdings are shown, and the frequency of works that are more average than outstanding.

The family and the museum have agreed that once every decade, these spaces will present all-Fisher exhibitions, which seems fine. Less fine is the agreement to keep the displays here 75 percent Fisher at all other times. I'm sure Mr. Garrels and his colleagues have ideas about how to work around this potentially Barnesian restriction, or the Fishers may appear to have opened their own museum after all.