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MoMA Reboots With 'Modernism Plus'

By **Holland Cotter**

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When the Museum of Modern Art reopens on Oct. 21 after a \$450-million, 47,000-square-foot expansion, it will finally, if still cautiously, reveal itself to be a living, breathing 21st-century institution, rather than the monument to an obsolete history — white, male, and nationalist — that it has become over the years since its founding in 1929.

After decades of stonewalling multiculturalism, MoMA is now acknowledging it, even investing in it, most notably in a permanent collection rehang that features art — much of it recently acquired — from Africa, Asia, South America, and African America, and a significant amount of work by women. In short, what's primarily different about the reopened MoMA is the integrated presence of "difference" itself — a presence that takes the museum back to its experimental early days, when American self-taught art and non-Western art were on the bill.

Did we need a supersized (one-third larger), nearly blocklong multiplex MoMA — with a Diller, Scofidio + Renfro /Gensler extension tacked onto the 2004 building designed by Yoshio Taniguchi — to accommodate this presence? No. As we learn from every art fair every year, more art is not more. What's needed is agile planning and alert seeing, and these are evident in the museum's modestly scaled opening attractions, which include focused surveys of two African-American artists ([Bettye Saar](#) and [William Pope.L](#)), installations by artists from India (Sheela Gowda and Dayanita Singh), a sampler of Latin American work, and a permanent collection gallery devoted to contemporary art from China.

But in every museum with an active acquisition program, the permanent collection galleries are key. They're the heart, brain and soul of the place; its history and memory. Special, short-term shows bring people through the door. But they end, move on. If you want to know what a museum is really about, what it's feeling and thinking, keep your eye on the art it owns and gives its walls and floors to, long-term.

Judged by this metric alone, the expanded MoMA is making obvious efforts to reshape its image without going entirely off-brand — to tell the tale of what might be called Modernism Plus, with globalism and African-American art added.

The museum has long been famous for inventing an ironclad view of Modern art as a succession of marquee "isms" (Cubism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, etc.), and arranging its holdings to illustrate that. The very rough outline is still in place on the three floors of collection galleries: art from the 19th century through 1940 on five, from 1940 to 1970 on four, and from 1970 to the present on two. But the main route is now peppered with unexpected inclusions and interrupted by theme-based detours and byways.

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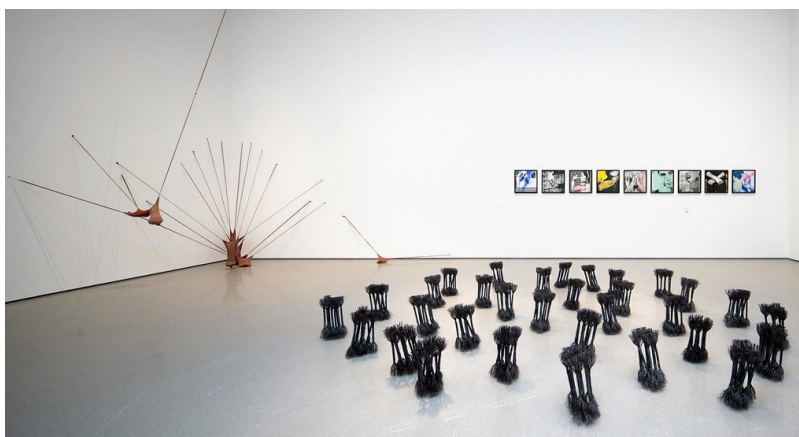
Also, walls between disciplines, once firm, are down. The permanent gallery rehang, coordinated by five chief curators from departments across the museum, has been, and will be, a collaborative project. The prevailing style is mix-and-match, with sculpture, painting, design, architecture, photography and film bunking in together (something that will freak out orthodox modernists). But, rest assured, each discipline gets some space of its own.

The jumble can be confusing, as, at first, are certain features of the general floor plan. Previously, visitor traffic entering the main lobby from West 53rd Street flowed to the right, toward the Sculpture Garden and up to the galleries. Now you have a directional choice. You can still go that way, or opt to go left toward the new Geffen wing, where you will find, among other things, street-level galleries to which admission is free (as it has been, since 2013, to the Sculpture Garden).

One of these holds a selection of design items chosen by Paola Antonelli, senior curator in the department of Architecture and Design. Another, the double-height Projects 110 Gallery, has a set of penumbral oil-on-barkcloth narrative paintings by the young Kenyan-born painter Michael Armitage, in a New York solo debut. Organized by Thelma Golden, director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, this show is the first in a series to be presented here by the Studio Museum while its new David Adjaye-designed home is under construction.

Upstairs navigation is easier, familiar. As before, the permanent collection galleries begin, chronologically, in the Taniguchi building and move from there straight west into the Geffen, with black metal door frames marking the points of transition. And on the fifth floor you're eased into a plunge into modernism with a grouping of Brancusi sculptures set just outside the galleries themselves.

Finally, we get charismatic images by names that should be on every art-lover's A-list but aren't — yet: Geta Bratescu, Graciela Carnevale, Sari Dienes, Rosalyn Drexler, Valie Export, Beatriz González, Maren Hassinger, Atsuko Tanaka, along with Benny Andrews, Ibrahim El-Salahi, and May Stevens, all three part of the exceptionally strong installation of Vietnam War-era art, "War Within, War Without," that brings the 4th floor rehang to a close.



Left and center, Senga Nengudi's "R.S.V.P. I" (1977/2003) and Maren Hassinger "Leaning" (1980), in a second-floor gallery, "Hardware/Software." Credit: Jeenah Moon for The New York Times