

Art in America

Local Largesse: Collected in San Francisco

by Lindsay Pollock

May 17, 2016

Over the weekend, Bay Area residents got a first look inside a \$305-million addition to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA). The new ten-story building, clad with a rippling, glacier-like facade and designed by the Norwegian firm Snøhetta, occupies a narrow urban lot adjacent to the museum's 1995 brick building by Swiss architect Mario Botta. The collection has nearly tripled in size in the last two decades, and, with the new addition, the museum now boasts 460,000 square feet, making it one of the largest in the country. The first round of shows is drawn from over four thousand recent gifts, including 260 works from Gap billionaires Donald and Doris Fisher, and 600 works from 230 other donors.



I attended a preview in late April, hoping to see works reflective of a local art scene. To an extent, that perspective can be found in a sprawling third-floor photography exhibition, “California and the West,” which is stocked with vintage black-and-white prints by Imogen Cunningham, Ansel Adams, Dorothea Lange, and Robert Adams. The upper and far more grandly scaled floors devoted to painting and sculpture are distinctly less oriented toward the West Coast, devoted instead to artists found on the international museum circuit: Ellsworth Kelly, Gerhard Richter, and Agnes Martin, among others. Floor after floor showcase donations as a grandiose “thank you” to the donor pool. At the same time, the blue-chip marathon presents an irrefutable picture of the financial muscle and pride of Bay Area collectors such as the Fishers and SFMOMA board chairman Charles Schwab. At a time when US museums depended on collectors for up to eighty-five percent of acquisitions, according to 2015 figures from the Association of American Museum Directors, the power held by collectors is undeniable.

I found that in San Francisco the impact of local collectors—their holdings, money, and ambition—spilled beyond the museum’s undulating walls. During my three-day tour around town, I was struck by some of the new projects and models spurred by local collectors who are taking cues from San Francisco’s eclectic history, from the countercultural periods to the more recent Silicon Valley mentality. For example, Andrew and Mary Pilara began collecting just thirteen years ago and have already amassed over four thousand photographs. They have leased from the city a dilapidated pier—and with some pluck and plenty of money transformed it into an expansive exhibition space devoted to works by American photographers. Called Pier 24, it presents rotating shows of works drawn from the Pilara Foundation and other collections.

Underscoring the local commitment to photography—and echoing the floor devoted to the medium at SFMOMA—Pier 24 has mounted a show titled “Collected,” on view through January 31, 2017. The premise seems a bit trite, but the works are well chosen and offer insight into the collectors’ psychology. One room features works by Erin Shirreff and more conceptually oriented fare on loan from Instagram founder Mike Krieger and his wife, Kaitlyn. A suite of trenchant images of the American South and West from William Eggleston’s 1960s and 1970s “Los Alamos” series appears courtesy of Randi Fisher and her husband, Bob (son of Doris and Donald Fisher).

Further afield, in a rapidly developing area known as Dogpatch, retired venture capitalist Andy Rappaport and his wife, Deborah, are creating what they hope will prove a sustainable model to keep artists' studios and galleries alive in an otherwise unaffordable real-estate climate. They have been buying up warehouse buildings and have opened the Minnesota Street Project, which rents space to twelve galleries at below-market rates. Across the street, another warehouse is under construction and slated to contain thirty-five affordable artists' studios. The Rappaports, who collect art themselves, may have altruistic motives, but they have not conceived of the project according to the usual nonprofit model. They will be offering art storage and other services at market rates with a view to using those proceeds to subsidize the gallery rents and studios. Will it work? Who knows, but it's certainly worth keeping an eye on.

Finally, there is the quirky and dazzling Mission District 500 Capp St. Foundation, which opened in January and showcases the life's work of late Conceptual artist David Ireland. The building's existence can really be chalked up to a spontaneous decision on the part of a local art patron, Carlie Wilmans, who bought the house to prevent it from being sold to someone without the means or desire to preserve Ireland's legacy. Ireland's ghostly gray home, with a glistening yellow varnished interior, is about as far from SFMOMA's expansive new white-cube galleries in scale, spirit, and aesthetics as one could imagine. Yet both venues reflect the good will and local largesse as collectors steer San Francisco's cultural development, for better and worse.