



NEW YORK ODYSSEY: The Whitney reestablishes itself downtown

By Peter Schjeldahl

April 27, 2015 Issue



The conservation room in the Whitney's new building, designed by Renzo Piano, who worked from "the logic of the force of necessity" to fulfill the needs of the curators and the staff. CREDIT PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD BARNES

The Whitney Museum of American Art, long the odd duck among the Big Four of Manhattan art museums—a cohort that includes the mighty Metropolitan, the starry Modern, and the raffish Guggenheim—takes wing on May 1st, when it reopens in a new, vastly expanded headquarters downtown. The fledging owes a lot to the Italian architect Renzo Piano's ingenious building, on Gansevoort Street, which features six floors of shapely galleries, four open-air terraces, spaces for performance and screening, a library and reading rooms, a restaurant, a café, and an over-all feeling of seductive amenity—a bar on the piazza-like ground floor bodes to be one of the toniest trysting spots in town. It is likely to win far more fans than the Whitney's old home, Marcel Breuer's brutalist "inverted ziggurat," which opened in 1966, on Madison Avenue, and which it vacated six months ago and leased to the Met. Piano's museum stands at the southern end of the High Line and hard by the Hudson River, in what remains of the tatterdemalion meatpacking district. It looms like a mother ship for both gallery-jammed Chelsea, to the north, and the pattering West Village, to the south. It is instantly a landmark on the cultural and social maps of the city—and on its poetic map, as a site to germinate memories.

But the most compelling change is a refurbished sense of mission for the eighty-four-year-old institution, signalled by the inaugural show, of six hundred and fifty works from the permanent collection, titled “America Is Hard to See.” The timing couldn’t be better for a detailed and vividly embodied engagement with the question of what has been meant by “American” modern art. The Whitney’s parochial mandate seemed a handicap during the past century of marching cosmopolitan styles, from Post-Impressionism and Cubism to minimalism and the myriad variants of conceptual art. Nationalism was then a bugaboo. But the restriction becomes a strength as, day after day in the headlines, one dream after another of a borderless world flames out. A national perspective offers a sturdy point of reference amid the redundancies of the nowhere-in-particular globalized culture.

Donna De Salvo, the Whitney’s chief curator since 2006, told me, “Our nimble spirit comes from our close working relationship with artists.” We stood outside her seventh-floor office, facing one of the building’s magnificent waterfront views. De Salvo is a veteran of museum work. She has been an adventurous curator at the Dia Art Foundation and, from 2000 to 2004, at London’s Tate Modern. Her comment jibed with my longtime sense of the Whitney as something like the big museum in a small city where all the people involved with art know one another. Partly, this reflects the history of the collection. Its beginnings were genteel-bohemian, with several hundred contemporary American works that belonged to the energetic heiress, sculptor, and saloniste Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. A passionate soul, Whitney, married to the businessman and horse breeder Harry Payne Whitney, chafed at the constraints of her caste. At the age of nineteen, she complained in her journal that “a man chooses the path that gives him the most thrill. That is what I want.” Art offered an escape from what she called “the big stagnation of riches,” as an avenue for both patronage and creativity; her own comic 1941 bronze of Peter Stuyvesant, in Stuyvesant Square, is a gem of public art.

In 1930, Whitney had offered her collection, which included many works by John Sloan, George Bellows, and other Ashcan School painters, and by the sterling modernists Marsden Hartley, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Stuart Davis, to the Metropolitan Museum. But the director, Edward Robinson, who was both averse to modern art and contemptuous of its American proponents, spurned it. Juliana Force, Whitney’s emissary, reported that he told her, “What will we do with them, dear lady? We have a cellar full of those things already.” She stormed out of his office without having conveyed Whitney’s offer of five million dollars for a new wing to house the works.

Whitney decided to open her own museum, on West Eighth Street, in 1931, and appointed Force its director. Since then, seven directors have overseen the growth of the collection, which now contains twenty-two thousand items, seventeen thousand of them works on paper. There are such touchstones as Alexander Calder’s “Circus” (1926-31), Arshile Gorky’s “The Artist and His Mother” (1926-36), Jasper Johns’s “Three Flags” (1958), Jay DeFeo’s massive relief “The Rose” (1958-66), Willem de Kooning’s “Door to the River” (1960), Nan Goldin’s slide-show installation “The Ballad of Sexual Dependency” (1979-96), and Mike Kelley’s caustic stuffed-animal array “More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid” (1987). But the collection lacks depth in most major

artists, with the important exception of Edward Hopper. The Whitney has the largest concentration of his art anywhere, including such paintings as “Railroad Sunset” (1929) and the storefront epiphany “Early Sunday Morning” (1930), along with more than twenty-five hundred drawings. By ever more general agreement, Hopper is this country’s painter laureate, or, as De Salvo calls him, “our Picasso.”

At unfortunate points in its history, the museum, intent on a contemporary focus, sold off its holdings in nineteenth-century art and folk art. It has no design collection, and it is still playing catchup in its departments of photography and film. But, as a whole, the collection, which tracks often relatively unfamiliar phases of twentieth-century art history, like the socially conscious work of the nineteen-thirties, tells a picaresque story of New York’s living, working art world since the First World War: its movements and coteries, its aesthetic and social upheavals, its fashions and follies.

The Whitney’s Manhattan-centrism assumes a symbolic mien on the outside of its new quarters. The building is a lurching aggregate of shapes in striated steel cladding and glass, with outdoor stairways that connect terraces on three floors. It’s so confusing that, pretty soon, I gave up looking at it. The jumble doesn’t displease Piano, the go-to architect for museums. Counting his initial, revolutionary (to a hectic fault) design of the Pompidou Center, in Paris, which opened in 1977, he has worked on twenty-four museums, thirteen of them in the United States. These include expansions to the Art Institute of Chicago, New York’s Morgan Library, and the Kimbell, in Fort Worth; and at least one masterpiece, the magically daylight-modulating Menil Collection, in Houston. The Whitney’s trustees interviewed several other potential architects for the new building, asking each to name a favorite museum. According to Stephen Soba, the Whitney’s director of communications, they all named the Menil. That clinched the choice.

I met Piano in his offices, on Washington Street, around the corner from the new building. At the age of seventy-seven, he is dapper and brisk—at one point, he called himself “an old man,” although he can’t possibly feel like one. I asked why he had chosen to design so many museums. He thought for a moment, then said, “For some funny reason, nothing is more different than museums.” He described a five-year design process for the Whitney, during which, accepting “the logic of the force of necessity,” he sought to fulfill the wishes of the curators and the staff. Previously, the conservation, photographic, digital, art-handling, and storage departments, among others, were crowded into nooks of the Breuer building, scattered to outlying sites, or, in the case of a theatre for performances and lectures, nonexistent. The new building cost four hundred and twenty-two million dollars, and there’s plenty of evidence of how it was spent in the capacious and state-of-the-art amenities, including advanced X-ray and infrared equipment and flood protection—a special concern post-Hurricane Sandy. Touring the premises, I met specialists in several departments who are well satisfied with the new quarters. Architecturally, the main element is a load-bearing “spine,” which contains the elevator banks, and at once divides and connects the galleries, on the south side of the

building, and the offices and facilities, on the north. In the result, form doesn't so much follow function as happily succumb to it.

But Piano expressed pride in the startling mismatch of the museum's eastern and western fronts. Smiling, he related the contrast to the spirit of Saul Steinberg's classic drawing, "View of the World from Ninth Avenue" (1976), the all-time signifier of a New Yorker's vague notion of whatever may distinguish the lands beyond the Hudson. On the east, the building congenially descends in tiers—"to bring down the scale," he said—toward the historic low-rise buildings of the neighborhood. The side that faces the river is "more massive, more strong," Piano said. A truncated-pyramid profile with jutting banks of large windows, it "talks to the rest of the world" from an attitude of confident majesty. Immodestly, but with proof in the product, the architect cited the elements that he had sought to incorporate in the design: "social life, urbanity, invention, construction, technology, poetry, light—an immense rich bouillabaisse."

The title of the opening show, "America Is Hard to See," is from a Robert Frost poem of 1951, which imagines Christopher Columbus's dismay at the look of the land that he assumed he had reached: "There had been something strangely wrong / With every coast he tried along. . . . He wasn't off a mere degree; / His reckoning was off a sea." The show is divided into twenty-three sections, representing epochs, sometimes brief, of prevalent ideas and styles, which visitors are invited to survey as that many disconcerting shores. The show starts enchantingly, in intimate ground-floor galleries—free to viewers, although they must pay twenty-two dollars for general admission—with exhibits from the Whitney Studio Club, which Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney started in Greenwich Village in 1914, on a modest scale, and expanded over the years.

In part, collecting fed what she called a "big wanting for little things," and a group of small, stylized sculptures of animals, by folk and modern artists, impart a fondly domestic touch to the exhibition. Portraits of the willowy doyenne—an oil by Robert Henri and a photograph by Edward Steichen—accompany paintings by Sloan, George Luks (his 1918 panorama of a joyous city, "Armistice Night"), Hopper, Davis, and others, along with a canvas and satirical cartoons of New York society, high and low, by the artist, journalist, and man-about-town Guy Pène du Bois. The studio club provided artists with a warm and racy social scene and a chance to work from nude models, something that was rare at the time. Thirteen life studies by Hopper evince an ability that, in the pictorial dramas of his mature style, he downplayed to the point of concealing it.

Adam Weinberg, who has been the museum's director since 2003, told me that he sees the show as "a history of the Whitney's psyche," keyed to an "artichoke theory" of peeling back "layers of contradictions and complexities." Each section is named for a work in it, creating an over-all effect that is alternately descriptive, interpretative, and fanciful. The rubrics emerged in brainstorming by curators—led by De Salvo and including Scott Rothkopf, Dana Miller, and Carter Foster—who worked as a team on nearly every aspect of the selection and the installation. "Abstracted Forms," "Breaking the Prairie," and "Fighting with All Our Might" are a few of the groupings that cover

trends of the twenties and thirties. “New York, NY, 1955,” a gallery of triumphant Abstract Expressionist works by, among others, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Franz Kline, takes its name from a jolting air-brushed painting of architectonic forms by the little-known Hedda Sterne—the only woman in the famous Life photograph, from 1952, of the movement’s leaders. (The curators have taken care to include neglected but fully worthy female and minority artists.) Pop art arrives with “Large Trademark,” which surveys the usual canon of Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenburg, et al., but is unexpectedly augmented with works that are at once heterodox and apposite for the period, such as Alex Katz’s billboard-bright portrait of his wife, Ada, “The Red Smile” (1963); Vija Celmins’s “Heater” (1964), depicting a portable space heater glowing orange against a ground of subtle grays; and my favorite Photo-Realist painting, Robert Bechtle’s “’61 Pontiac” (1968-69), from a snapshot of an ordinary-seeming suburban family that happened to be his own.

“Rational Irrationalism” amounts to a provocative—and boldly illuminating—two-word critical essay on minimalist and post-minimalist art. (Minimalism’s sleek rectitude always had a touch of the wacky at its spiritual core.) “Raw War” gathers protest art from the Vietnam era, and “Love Letter from the War Front” memorializes the AIDS crisis. The turn to self-contemplation, in the seventies, by artists ranging from Chris Burden to Cindy Sherman, is billed “Learn Where the Meat Comes From.” The final section, “Course of Empire,” zooms in on the joys, sorrows, and contentions of post-9/11 America. It is followed by “Get Rid of Yourself,” a looping program of videos and films that track the prevalence of those mediums in new art, starting with Jack Smith’s bacchanalian “Flaming Creatures” (1962-1963) and featuring the first major work of the wunderkind Ryan Trecartin, “A Family Finds Entertainment” (2004).

If such labelling sounds pushy, it is. But first-rate works stand out for their timeless qualities and easily slip the bonds of their classification, while lesser ones provide grace notes and variations on the dominant themes. Seeing, thinking, and evaluating proceed in harness. People will revisit and debate the show until it closes, in September. After that, the concerted seriousness of the Whitney’s curatorial team—which includes, notably, Jay Sanders, an expert in performance art—promises a routine of challenges to viewers’ intelligence and sensitivity. Don’t expect populist cheese like the Museum of Modern Art’s current Björk show. Tourists will be welcomed but not stroked.

Some sections relate specifically to places west of the Hudson. Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Andrew Wyeth receive their due—looking far better to me than they used to, as the old rancorously competing narratives of the cosmopolitan and the native fade into history. (The long-denigrated Curry’s rustic El Greco pastiche, “Baptism in Kansas,” from 1928, springs to life.) The rise of the Northern and Southern California avant-gardes in the fifties and sixties registers strongly; Los Angeles’s Ed Ruscha figures prominently in two of the sections, bolstering his reputation as, after Warhol, perhaps the most influential American artist of the past half century. Artists of Chicago weigh in, though skimpily, but the show skews to the museum’s tradition of channelling New York sensibilities.

Although the Whitney moved out of the Village, first to West Fifty-fourth Street, in 1954, and then to the Upper East Side, it stayed umbilically related to downtown studio society. Since the sixties, its share in the general professionalizing of museums by university-trained specialist curators has attenuated the link but not broken it. The Whitney Biennials, the springtime roundups of recent work—which, between 1937 and 1973, were Annuals—set the tone and suggest agendas for the local scene. They draw inevitable complaints of anguish and disdain from excluded artists, while testy critics reliably level charges of pandering, when the selection is trendy; tendentiousness, when it is thematic; or incoherence, when it is neither of the above.

My usual tolerance failed me at the notoriously polemical 1993 Biennial, at which the artist Daniel Martinez handed out buttons that read “I can’t imagine ever wanting to be white.” But I was wrong. The show responsibly defined a generational wave of artists affected by the Reagan-era culture wars, AIDS, and the heady allure of the new critical theory—poststructuralism, deconstruction—taught in universities. It spotlighted such formidable talents as Robert Gober, Charles Ray, Kiki Smith, Sue Williams, Matthew Barney, Glenn Ligon, and Lorna Simpson. The Biennials give discursive edge and a buzz of erotic festivity to the changing scene. My one undying complaint is that the Biennials are no longer Annuals. Every spring, in my utopia, daffodils sprout and people go to the Whitney. Today, only the heartless money traps known as art fairs address the primitive yen for yearly ritual. Two-year gaps put undue pressure to succeed on each show (as it is, the next Biennial will not be until 2017). Like a losing baseball team, the occasional stinker should bring to mind the soothing incantation “Wait till next year.”

Long ago, New York’s galleries clustered near its chief museums: along Madison Avenue, before the Whitney got there, in the case of the Met; and on or near Fifty-seventh Street, close to MOMA. That changed in the early seventies, when dealers flocked to SoHo, where the time’s signal artists lived and hung out. An abundance of cheap convertible spaces motivated the subsequent efflorescence of Chelsea. A similar if scruffier logic has driven the proliferation of mostly tiny galleries on the Lower East Side, a scene that has found a hub in the lively, internationalist New Museum, on the Bowery—a Kunsthalle without a significant collection. The Whitney’s arrival at the foot of Chelsea, as an institution anchoring the art world’s primary commercial precinct of the moment, brings an echo of the old days. Just last week, it got a foretaste of what might beset it in the political culture of the neighborhood, when anti-fracking activists made it the locus for a street-theatre protest against a nearby underground natural-gas pipeline.

The relocated museum makes me surprisingly hopeful for the near future of art in New York. The new Whitney won’t do anything to ameliorate the crisis brought about by the crushing cost of living, which exiles young artists, writers, and other creative types to increasingly distant parts of the city, if not out of it altogether. (The museum will actually worsen the problem in its immediate vicinity, near the High Line.) Still, as long as the subways run, the Whitney will serve and fortify the shared experience and conversation of people who care about the roots and the contemporary branches of art that can’t help but be American.