

Review: ‘Embracing Modernism: Ten Years of Drawings Acquisitions’ at the Morgan Runs a Gamut

By **ROBERTA SMITH** APRIL 30, 2015

No museum exhibition is perfect, but some are less perfect than others. Surprisingly, even these shows sometimes turn out to be exceptionally valuable. They clarify notions of quality and the pleasures and rigors of looking, for curators and visitors alike.

“Embracing Modernism: Ten Years of Drawings Acquisitions” at the Morgan Library & Museum is one of these flawed gems. Of its nearly 100 drawings, about half are either weak or just acceptable, which is not good enough for an institution of the Morgan’s stature. It is crucial to note, of course, that the remaining half of the exhibition is often quite excellent, creating an invigorating visual Ping-Pong among great, good, average and less than.

This striking unevenness is a partial report on the health of the Morgan itself and the ways it has changed over the last 10 years — issued as it awaits the arrival of its new director, Colin B. Bailey. In that time it has opened its second attempt at renovation, a large glass-walled lobby and event space that has proved less and less suitable for a collection so dedicated to art forms involving paper.

The library also began pursuing 20th- and 21st-century works, until then only nominally present among its holdings. And it hired Isabelle Dervaux, its first curator of modern and contemporary art. Ms. Dervaux, a specialist in Surrealism, has organized excellent exhibitions at the Morgan. This one is also her effort, but while it is well organized and installed, it suggests that she is sometimes out of her depth with recent drawing.

The works on view represent about one-quarter of the drawings added to the Morgan's collection over the past decade. (Not counted are large groups of original studies for covers of *The New Yorker* and drawings by Maurice Sendak.)

Most of the works in this show are the artists' first to enter the collection. They range over more than a century of American and European art, beginning with a sturdy ink still life by Matisse from 1900 and concluding with a derivative Conceptual work from 2013 by Gavin Turk, one of the Young British Artists, and a painting on paper by the great Peter Saul that is not a good fit here. In between are outstanding works by Juan Gris, Balthus, Erich Heckel, Mondrian, Jim Nutt, Martin Kippenberger, Steve DiBenedetto, Anne-Marie Schneider, Gordon Onslow Ford, Marco Maggi and Will Barnet.

There's an elegant collaboration in words and pictures by Larry Rivers and the poet Frank O'Hara from 1957, and an aerial landscape by Saul Steinberg replete with a sinister yet comical black bomber — early stealth — from 1945. The febrile lines of a large early Mondrian landscape (circa 1910-11) all but vibrate off the paper, and the ground itself, toward abstraction. Bruce Nauman's "6 Inches of My Knee Extended to 6 Feet," from 1967 is an actual-size study as perverse as the important early sculpture made from it. It is part of a recent and exceptional gift from the Roy and Dorothy Lichtenstein Collection that also includes some drawings by Mr. Lichtenstein. (Mrs. Lichtenstein has also donated three of her husband's sketchbooks.)

It is interesting to mesh one's reaction to individual works with the information on the labels. For example, many of the show's best works date from before 1950. Factor in that three-quarters of the works are from after 1950, and you've got a distinct downward trend.

Ms. Dervaux helped establish a collectors' group in 2005 to acquire recent drawings for the museum, but fewer than half of the 22 works the group has donated — all exhibited here — seem truly Morgan-worthy; many are merely average. The best include a superb 1989 portrait by Chris Ofili — large and spidery of line — unlike anything I've seen in a New York museum, and works by Giuseppe Penone, Bruce Conner, Ed Paschke and Maria Lassnig. But the 2006 Georg Baselitz and the late '90s Richard Artschwager are vague and subpar, and there are too many drawings by artists, among them Susan Rothenberg, Paul Lee, Robert Overby, Anne Chu and Suzan Frecon, whose strengths lie in other mediums.

Sometimes the Morgan is simply off target in the works it accepts. The large Peter Saul oil on paper, for example, given by the artist and his wife, would be fine elsewhere. But a draftsman with Mr. Saul's gifts should enter the Morgan with a real drawing that is also a real knockout. The same is true for Carroll Dunham: He looks good here but is not at his succinct and aggressive best. Too often there is a sense of the library politely settling.

The show improves when it ventures toward the margins of the mainstream. A fiery rendering of mothers and children by Marisol is magnificent. Other substantial additions include a fastidious bit of domestic conflict by the painter Mark Greenwold; two folding books — one dominated by language, the other by images — by Martin Wilner; and a tender little satire of the art world by the inimitable humorist William Anthony.

It's interesting to consider why a work was acquired, in addition to how. The reasons vary widely. "Blind Sculpture (Dinosaur Act)" by Neil Gall, depicting a pile of soft shapes in colored pencil, resembles one of Irving Penn's close-up color photographs of makeup for Vogue magazine. It's slick, but seems appropriate for the library: Its scale and bravura form an extremely accessible exultation of the craft of drawing today.

I'm generally not a fan of the work of Jamie Wyeth, but his taut little 1976 portrait of "Andy Warhol — Facing Left (Study #2)" — an updated dandified version of Whistler's Mother — is a perfect gift from the artist for the Morgan.

"Embracing Modernism" reveals a museum, like many others these days, that is desperate to be involved with contemporary art but only intermittently holds such works to the rigorous standards it applies when acquiring older material. It needs to stop lurching this way and that after big names or genial graphic attractiveness, the latest fashion or superficial diversity. And luckily, while there is plenty of room for improvement at the Morgan, it also has a fairly wide open field. Most of New York's other museums — the medium-dedicated, visually challenged Drawing Center included — pay only intermittent attention to excellence in recent drawing.

How hard could tracking down better drawings be? Sometimes the show makes it depressingly clear that developing connoisseurship is a challenge. Yet few mediums are more accessible. Open your eyes and get quiet. Make a beeline for the visual magnets that are the great drawings, the ones that say, in effect,

“Hey, over here.”

“Embracing Modernism: Ten Years of Drawings Acquisitions” is on view through May 25 at the Morgan Library & Museum, 225 Madison Avenue at 36th Street; 212-685-0008, themorgan.org.

A version of this review appears in print on May 1, 2015, on page C19 of the New York edition with the headline: Drawing From Across the Board.

© 2015 The New York Times Company