

Museums Are Swapping Paintings by White Male Artists for Works by Black Artists, Filling Historic Gaps in Their Collections

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Jul 6, 2019 • 10:58 am

FOR GENERATIONS, African American artists have not received anywhere near the institutional and market recognition experienced by their white peers. In terms of acquisitions, many museums are attempting long-delayed corrections.

Few museums have consistently collected works by black artists, leaving historic gaps in their collections. To address these shortfalls and diversify their holdings, three museums have recently swapped paintings by well-known white male artists for works by African American ones. Such transactions were announced at the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) last year, and at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) and the Springfield Art Museum in Springfield, Mo., last week.



NICK CAVE, *Soundsuit*, 2009 (mixed media including sisal, knitted fabric, metal armature, plastic, electrical tape 103 x 38 x 26 inches). | Collection of the Springfield Art Museum. Gift by exchange of Ronald K., Robert C., and Larry H. Greenberg © Nick Cave

On June 26, SFMOMA shared news of 11 acquisitions by 10 contemporary and modern artists including **Norman Lewis** (1909-1979), **Alma Thomas** (1891-1978), **Mickalene Thomas**, and **Frank Bowling**. The additions were funded by the sale of an untitled Mark Rothko painting from 1960.

The Springfield Art Museum announced the acquisition of a **Nick Cave** Soundsuit on July 1. Seven prints from Campbell Soup I series of 10 serigraphs by Andy Warhol (1928-1987) were stolen from the museum in 2016. Funds from the \$750,000 insurance settlement, designated strictly for acquisitions, were used to buy the work. Covered with sock monkeys, the colorful 2009 Soundsuit is currently on view in Cave's exhibition at the museum through July 28.

The museum certainly didn't set out to trade the Warhols for an artwork by an African American artist. However, faced with the loss it acted with determination. Described by the museum as the "first use" of the insurance funds, the purchase was made as part of the institution's desire to acquire works by artists with ties to the Midwest. Chicago-based Cave was born in Fulton, Mo.

"When I think of Missouri artists who document what it means to be living in this country at a particular moment in time, I think of George Caleb Bingham in the 19th century, Thomas Hart Benton in the 20th century, and Nick Cave in the 21st century, so it was very important for the Museum to add Nick Cave to our permanent collection," Springfield Art Museum Director Nick Nelson said in a statement when the acquisition was announced. Apparently women artists don't come to mind when he considers the past three centuries.

The Baltimore museum deaccessioned works by Warhol, Franz Kline (1910-1962), Kenneth Noland (1924-2010), Jules Olitski (1922-2007), and Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008) dating from 1956 to 1979, with the knowledge that stronger examples of works by the artists remained in its collection. The decision was made explicitly in order to broaden representation of women artists and artists of color.

After the works were consigned to Sotheby's for public and private sales, the museum announced the purchase of seven works with the funds, five of them by black artists. The proceeds were used in full or part to acquire works by **Isaac Julien**, **Wangechi Mutu**, **Amy Sherald**, **Jack Whitten**, and **Lynette Yiadom-Boakye**.

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MICKALENE THOMAS, "Qusuquzah, une tres belle negresse 1," 2011 | San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, purchase by exchange, through a gift of Peggy Guggenheim, © Mickalene Thomas/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Katherine Du Tiel

SFMOMA's ROTHKO sold for \$50.1 million, including fees, at Sotheby's New York in May. (The museum told ARTnews that it netted \$42.8 million from the sale.) With the windfall, the museum added "Qusuquzah, une très belle négresse 1," a rhinestone-embellished three-quarter length portrait by Mickalene Thomas and abstract paintings by Bowling, Lewis, and Alma Thomas, to its holdings.

The museum called the Brooklyn-based artist's portrait "monumental" adding that it depicted Qusuquzah, a transgender woman and frequent model for Thomas. It further noted: "Inspired by Édouard Manet's *La Nègresse* (The Negro Woman) from 1862, and rooted in a refusal to believe in the invisibility of the black woman, Thomas's portrait repositions her model as a beautiful black figure who cannot be overlooked."

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In addition to the four works by black artists, the deaccession funds were used to acquire two works by Lygia Clark (1920-1988), and one each by Rebecca Belmore, Forrest Bess (1911-1977), Leonora Carrington (1917-1911), Barry McGee, and Kay Sage (1898-1963). Gary Garrels, curator of painting and sculpture at SFMOMA, said works by the artists had been on the museum's "wish list" for years.

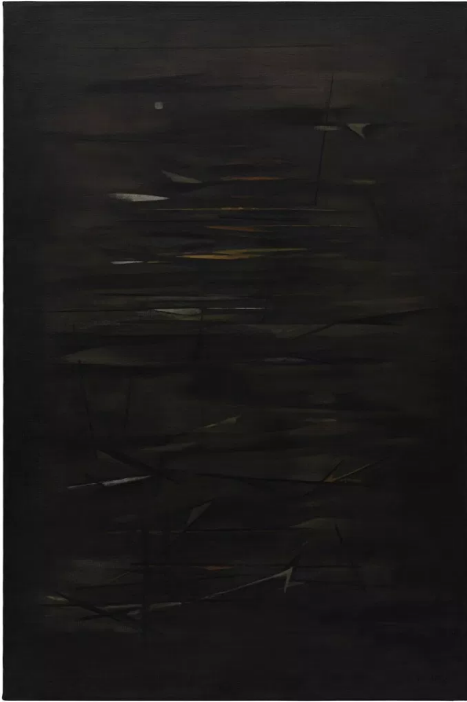
When the acquisitions were announced, the museum statement said, "These acquisitions are part of an ongoing program funded by the sale of this painting with the goals of broadly diversifying the collection, enhancing modern and contemporary holdings and addressing historical gaps. The proceeds from this sale also will be used to create a new endowment fund for future acquisitions."

In other words, one painting by Rothko yielded funds substantial enough to buy 11 works by various artists—including a painting by Lewis, an abstract expressionist who was a contemporary of Rothko—and establish an endowment to buy many more artworks in the years to come.

The exchange broadens SFMOMA's collection and provides for additional opportunities to diversify its holdings, but it also demonstrates the disparities that exist in the art market with certain artists—chiefly white male artists—commanding prices exponentially higher than women artists and artists of color, a longstanding trend that persists even as these groups gain wider recognition.

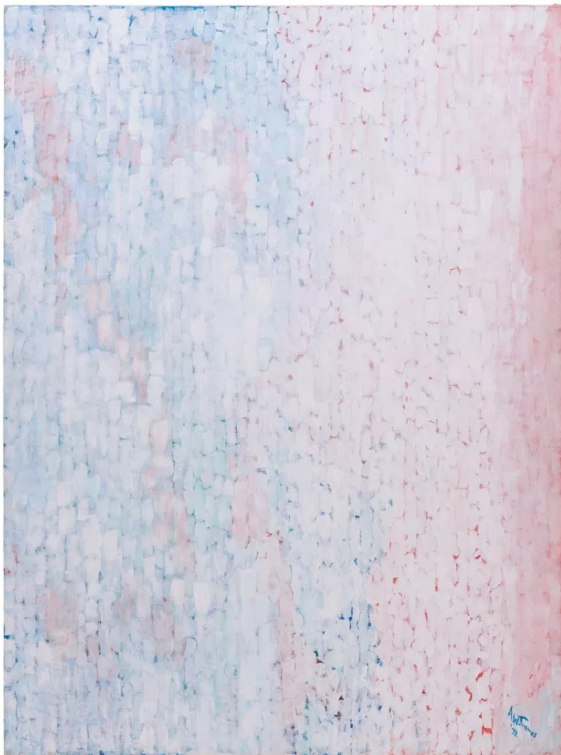
The new acquisitions will be on display in SFMOMA's collection galleries beginning in August 2019.

"This is just the beginning of what we will be able to accomplish with this fund, which allows us to broaden the scope of the stories we are able to tell in our galleries," Neal Benezra, director of SFMOMA, said in a statement. "With these works, many of which are the first by these extraordinary artists to enter our holdings, we will be able to recontextualize our permanent collection and the Fisher Collection and expand the art historical narratives we share with our visitors." **CT**



NORMAN LEWIS, "Twilight," 1956 (oil on canvas, 59 3/4 x 40 inches). | San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, purchase by exchange, through a gift of Peggy Guggenheim, © Estate of Norman Lewis. Photo by Don Ross

SFMOMA: "In Norman Lewis's **Twilight** (1956), an array of red, orange and green hues flicker through a ground of deep earthen tones, suggesting dappled light peeking through the branches of a tree. This painting represents the height of the artist's abstract works of the 1950s, characterized by an interest in nature, spirituality and calligraphic gestures. Lewis's association with Abstract Expressionism makes his work an important addition to the collection, and allows SFMOMA to present a fuller and more complex history of the art of this time."



ALMA THOMAS, "Cumulus," 1972 (). | San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, purchase by exchange, through a gift of Peggy Guggenheim, © Estate of Alma Thomas. Photo by Katherine Du Tiel

SFMOMA: “**Cumulus** (1972) is among the most richly painted, sumptuous and subtlest works of Alma Thomas's career. The large-scale work encapsulates the singularity and distinction of her contribution to contemporary abstract painting. Her first work to enter SFMOMA's collection, Cumulus fills an important gap in the museum's holdings and relates to the work of Washington Color Field painters and Abstract Expressionists, as well as other abstract artists for whom color is an essential and salient element.”



FRANK BOWLING, “Elder Sun Benjamin,” 2018 (acrylic on collaged canvas, 119.29 h x 203.54 w inches / 303 h x 517 w cm). | San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, purchase by exchange, through a gift of Peggy Guggenheim, © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Don Ross

SFMOMA: “Made on a monumental scale with a bold geometric composition reminiscent of a national flag, **Elder Sun Benjamin** (2018) continues Frank Bowling's long explorations on postcolonial states, territories and migration with subtle allusions to his own autobiography. The addition of this significant composition, Bowling's first to enter SFMOMA's collection, bolsters the museum's rich holdings of international postwar abstraction; furthers SFMOMA's continued commitment to the art for our time; and adds to the institution's growing collection of recent works by black artists.”