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New Game Plan for a Smithsonian Showcase

Hirshhorn Museum expands modern-art offerings with more works by women and artists outside the U.S. and Europe; Japanese artist's show 'was a game-changer'



Katherine Bernhardt's 'Toilet paper and cigarettes black and pink' is part of the Hirshhorn Museum's drive to expand its range to more works by women and artists outside the U.S. and Europe. PHOTO: KATHERINE BERNHARDT/CANADA/JASON MANDELLA

By Kelly Crow

Aug. 21, 2019 11:50 am ET

When Melissa Chiu was hired to run the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., five years ago, she took a hard look at its collection and found the holdings were strong in modern sculptors like Henry Moore but weak in works by women and anyone living outside the U.S. or Europe.

Since then, Ms. Chiu said she and her curatorial team have sought to broaden the museum's scope by organizing shows of artists like Yayoi Kusama, the Japanese painter of polka dots whose mirrored "infinity room" installations helped to draw 1.2 million visitors to the Hirshhorn two years ago—more than doubling the museum's typical annual attendance.

"That was a game-changer for us," she said. The crowds that snaked around the doughnut-shape museum building as they waited in line gave her curatorial team the confidence to keep reshaping the collection's canon. So far, they have added roughly 150 works by dozens of artists by way of donations and purchases for an undisclosed sum.

On Aug. 24, the museum will reveal a selection of these newcomers in the exhibit "Feel the Sun in Your Mouth: Recent Acquisitions."

For the new show, one gallery is lined with black-and-white photographs documenting 1960s-era performances by other Japanese artists who were overlooked when Latvian

immigrant and financier Joseph Hirshhorn assembled the modern and postwar art that formed the foundation of the museum's permanent collection. (Mr. Hirshhorn donated 12,000 works to his namesake museum, which opened as a Smithsonian entity in 1974.)

Ms. Chiu, a native of Australia, is an expert on 20th-century Asian art in part because she championed it during her previous role as the longtime director of the Asia Society Museum in New York. At the Hirshhorn she said she is "filling in gaps in the global narrative."

These missing pieces include Minoru Hirata, a photojournalist who followed avant-garde artists around Japan and documented their performances, including one event where artist Natsuyuki Nakanishi covered a model's head in aluminum foil and clothespins.



Minoru Hirata's 'Natsuyuki Nakanishi's Clothespins Assert Churning Action (Clothespins on a model at the artist's studio for Hi Red Center's event, 6th Mixer Plan, in Tokyo, May 28, 1963),' printed in 2015. PHOTO: MINORU HIRATA/TAKA ISHII GALLERY NEW YORK

Another room brims with huge, colorful canvases covered in breezy, gestural brushstrokes or diffused with graffiti materials like spray paint.

Ms. Chiu said today's rising-star painters feel a "fresh confidence" working on a large scale without relying on traditional oils or complex narratives, including Brooklyn, N.Y., artist Katherine Bernhardt, whose 2016 painting "Toilet paper and cigarettes black and pink" nearly spans an entire wall.

Ms. Chiu said she likes the absurdity of Ms. Bernhardt's everyday vernacular: "Who paints rolls of toilet paper and cigarettes?"



Jill Mulleady's 'Mother Sucker' (2017). PHOTO: JILL MULLEADY/FREEDMAN FITZPATRICK

Jill Mulleady's 2017 painting "Mother Sucker" depicts an equally puzzling scene of a gray monkey with a deadpan gaze cradling a smaller, brown monkey against a tiny city skyline at night. Betsy Johnson, an assistant curator who helped organize the show, said the Uruguayan artist now based in Los Angeles is part of a newer generation of artists fascinated by jarring juxtapositions of nature and technology.

"It's supposed to be maternal, but it also feels uncanny, like it was pulled straight out of 'Planet of the Apes,'" Ms. Johnson said.

Other highlights include Berlin-based Alicja Kwade, whose glassy installations explore ideas about optics. Ms. Kwade, who grew up near the Berlin Wall, has a reputation for investigating the way audiences see her works as they walk around them.

The question situates Ms. Kwade in optical-illusion territory mined by greats like Marcel Duchamp and Richard Serra, but her "World Line" piece from 2018 offers a fresh take, Ms. Johnson said. The work looks like a set of window frames standing in a zigzag formation alongside a scattered group of tree trunks. As people pass by, they see that some of the panes are mirrored and some of the seemingly wooden logs are made from concrete or cast in bronze.

"You think you know what you're seeing, but the work is deceiving you," Ms. Johnson said. (The piece is the first major installation by the artist to be collected by a U.S. museum.)

Other pieces in the show explore elements of poetry, subtly in the case of French artist Laure Prouvost, whose 12-minute video "Swallow" lends the exhibit its title, "Feel the Sun in Your Mouth." At one point in the piece the artist whispers the phrase; the video



Alicja Kwade's 'WeltenLinie' or 'World Line' (2018). PHOTO: ALICJA KWADE/303 GALLERY, NEW YORK

otherwise is punctuated by a staccato of gasping breaths and bucolic scenes of birds and nude bathers.

Ms. Johnson said the artist made the 2013 work during a six-month residency in Italy, and "Swallow" uses technology to "conjure the senses" like a travel memoir.



Video still from Laure Prouvost's 'Swallow' (2013). PHOTO: HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN

New York poet and performance artist John Giorno's "Dial-A-Poem" from 1968-2012 is more blunt. The long-running piece that originated during the Pop era features a black rotary telephone sitting on a pedestal with instructions to pick up the receiver to hear a poem.

In some earlier iterations of the piece, viewers were instructed to dial a number. But the museum didn't want to befuddle younger visitors unused to dial phones, so this version links to recorded messages rather than an active phone line.

Write to Kelly Crow at kelly.crow@wsj.com

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