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The New York Times

Arts | Westchester

Works From Six Collections, in a Dialogue of Contradiction

By Karen Rosenberg

Published: June 25, 2010

Sometimes good shows come from bad ideas. That's the case with "Living With Art: Collecting Contemporary in Metro New York," at the Neuberger Museum of Art at Purchase College.



"Trade Fair" (2003), by Adam Dant.

"Living With Art" is the latest in a host of contemporary museum shows that genuflect to collectors, the New Museum's "Skin Fruit: Selections From the Dakis Joannou Collection" being the most controversial example. Ethically, shows like these raise eyebrows because they have the potential to increase the value of the exhibited art, and, aesthetically, they substitute a collector's eye for a curator's. On both counts, holding such a show is probably not the best move for a university art museum financed by the state.

The Neuberger's show has a twist, though: six different, often contradictory points of view. The element of competition makes it interesting, if still a bit suspect. Think of "Living With Art" as an extension of the collectors' brunches that accompany Armory Arts Week or Art Basel Miami Beach, minus the V.I.P. passes.

Helaine Posner, the museum's chief curator, has given each of the six collections its own gallery or niche, though the design of the exhibition allows for a bit of dialogue. There isn't much wall text, just opening statements from the collectors (all of them identified except for one mysterious "Private Collection").

The statements vary; some sound as though they were written by lawyers, while others are frank and personal. The anonymous collector offers platitudes like, "Dynamic art makes me feel alive." By contrast, Doreen and Gilbert Bassin trace their passion for collecting to a date at the Museum of Modern Art four decades ago.

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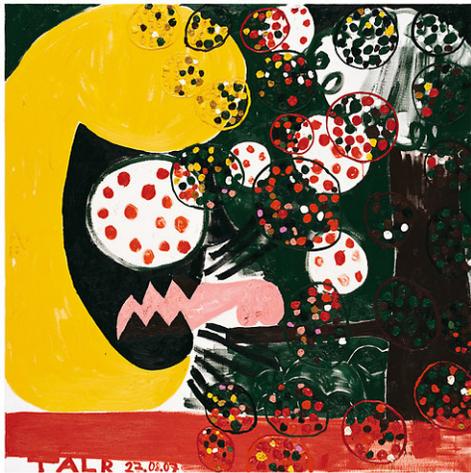
“Ruby Slippers” (2006), by Marilyn Minter.

The most cohesive group of works belongs to Jeffrey and Ruth Libin, who started collecting paintings about 20 years ago but gravitated to minimal, often monochromatic drawings. Their taste is exemplified by the nested graphite triangles in a James Siena work and the black-on-black text of a Glenn Ligon piece, though “Trade Fair,” an antic dystopian scene by Adam Dant, makes for a memorable exception.

Close by is a wonderfully diverse group of works from the unidentified collection.

Examples of visionary or surreal figuration by Henry Darger, Louise Bourgeois and others mix with nervy political art: a conspiracy-theory drawing by Mark Lombardi, and Michele Pred’s American flag made of enameled razor blades.

Examples of visionary or surreal figuration



“The Sweden” (2007), by Tal R.

Next up are the Bassins, who favor young artists skilled in expressionism, fantasy or both: Dana Schutz, Jonathan Meese and David Altmejd. The main surprise here is a glittering metal sculpture by El Anatsui (“Nukae,” from 2006), made of liquor bottle seals that have been flattened, twisted and linked into a kind of chain mail.

Much of the art in the Ginsberg collection is just as obsessively handmade: Martin Puryear’s overlapping horseshoes of painted pine, or Chakaia Booker’s self-portrait of shredded tires. Otherwise, a through line is hard to discern: Blue-chippers including Philip Guston and Sean Scully rub shoulders with newcomers like Sara VanDerBeek and Sara Greenberger Rafferty, and abstraction trades off with figuration.

There’s no question that Monica and Richard Segal are drawn to the figure, specifically the glamorous female figure. But the artists in their collection — Richard Prince, Eric Fischl, Tracey Emin and Marilyn Minter among them — approach this idealized body from many different angles.

Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg, meanwhile, prefer artists on the conceptual vanguard. (Their collection is also the focus of a coming show at the CCS Bard Hessel Museum.) Here you’ll see Martin Creed’s crumpled ball of paper and Rirkrit Tiravanija’s glass case of emptied liquor bottles, but also quieter provocations by Sergej Jensen and Richard Tuttle. Whether this work looks challenging or familiar will depend on how many art fairs you’ve been to recently.

Regular visitors to Chelsea and the Lower East Side might recognize some of the art from recent solo exhibitions — by Dasha Shishkin, Brendan Fowler and Ms. Rafferty, among others. In other ways, this show differs markedly from what you’d find in galleries (there’s hardly any video, let alone performance).

A bigger issue is that “Living With Art” doesn’t tell you much about the way people live with art. It doesn’t replicate groupings from the collectors’ homes, or use photographs to take you inside. Nor is there any information about when the works were acquired, or about the artists discovered. And for all the focus on “metro New York,” there isn’t much local interest; you’ll find similar collections in the museums and warehouses of Miami.

There’s strength in numbers, though. The six collections under one roof at the Neuberger reveal that the term “contemporary art” is a catch-all for many different tastes, and that the decision to acquire a work of art is deeply, sometimes indecipherably personal.

“Living With Art: Collecting Contemporary in Metro New York” continues through Aug. 14 at the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York, 735 Anderson Hill Road, Purchase. (914) 251-6100; neuberger.org.

A version of this review appeared in print on June 27, 2010, on page WE7 of the New York edition.