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ART REVIEW

At the MFA, a thin contemporary art collection finally feels in step with the times

By Murray Whyte Globe Staff, Updated December 19, 2019, 2:23 p.m.

Visitors peruse "Contemporary Art: Five Propositions" at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. © MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

The Museum of Fine Arts's newly reinstalled contemporary collection is called "Five Propositions," and I don't think you're wrong to read that as something of an apology. When a museum self-subdues — making suggestions, not holding forth — you know something's up.

When it comes to contemporary work — or anything made after the first few decades of the 20th century — the MFA's offerings are famously thin. The vast gaps in the museum's collection confound. American artists all but owned the 20th century, from Abstract Expressionism through Minimalism, Conceptualism, performance, installation, and virtually everything else. By the time the MFA established a contemporary department in 1971, Abstract Expressionism long had been canonized, both by history and the market; artists like Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg were superstars. History — much of it American history — had passed the museum by. Once close enough to touch, it was now out of reach, with formative 20th-century American masterworks long-since snapped up.

For a major US museum to sit out much of a century dominated by American artists seems nothing short of bizarre. Even today, the museum looks a little defensive: Winslow Homer, John Singer Sargent, and Claude Monet "were contemporary artists when some of their paintings were acquired [by the museum]," reads the introduction to the contemporary section on the MFA's website. The department lists just 1,500 contemporary works in a collection more than 450,000 strong. That tells you something.

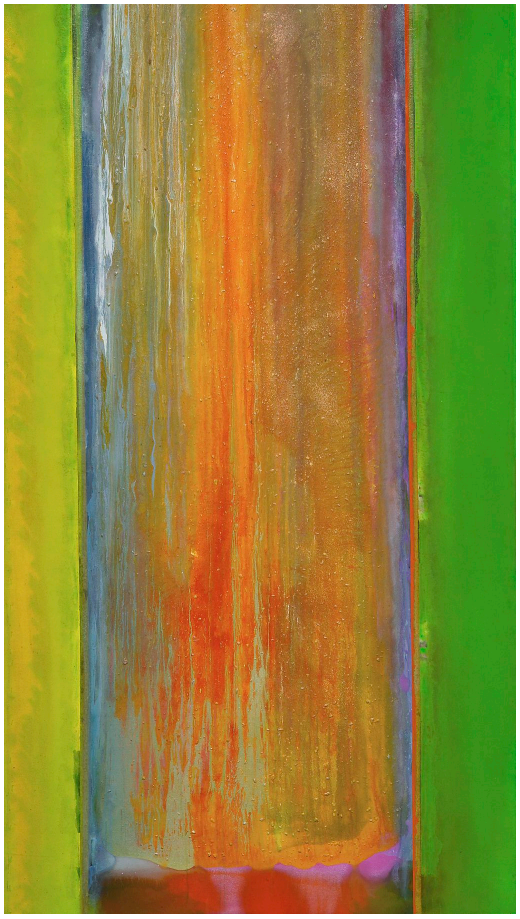
Reto Thüring, the MFA's chair of contemporary art, arrived just over a year ago, tasked with a deep dive into the shallow pool of contemporary holdings. Thüring, a soft-spoken, affable Swiss, knew full well he couldn't build something definitive with the resources at hand. What he could do, though, was craft a modest proposal about the nature of being definitive itself.

Improbably, that puts the MFA right in step with the cultural moment. Carved-in-stone narratives around artistic lineage, movement to movement, are now up in the air; tight histories are being pried open bit by bit. At long last the story isn't static, and "Five Propositions" succeeds where it turns weakness into strength by subverting established stories and surfacing long-marginalized chapters.

The show ignores timelines, bundling works made during the last century and last year. Its first proposition is called “Color Field” — a loaded term, and more on that soon. It opens with a sign of things to come: Near the entrance hangs a hectic and ebullient 1957 work by Helen Frankenthaler; across from it is Sam Gilliam’s “Balance,” a wash of bright color on a crumple of canvas from 1970; and above is an array of Vivian Suter’s gorgeous, soft, and breezy paintings, dangling like tapestries, from 2017.

Sam Gilliam's "Balance." © MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

Some works are newly acquired; some languished in storage for decades, seen rarely or never. Notable are the virtual unknowns who, somewhere along the way, got lost. The “Color Field” label matters. Coined by the critic Clement Greenberg, for whom painting’s future was evermore reductive abstraction, it’s a term of radical, monastic exclusion. That would make Frank Bowling, born in Guyana, an outsider — and yet here he is. His “Suncrush,” from 1976, flouts the rules of late abstraction. It’s a meaty, gestural riot, maximal where his peers were minimal. It’s bright and powerful, and until now, all but lost to history for those reasons and more.



Frank Bowling's "Suncrush" from 1976. © MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

At a time when notions of institutional authority are being surrendered before our eyes — most often willingly — airing out those limitations, if not exactly a strength, feels like a powerful bit of truth-telling, and a primer on what now feels like arbitrary consensus on what was deemed important and what, like “Suncrush,” was not. The show declares there isn’t one story, but many. For better or worse, “Five Propositions,” clear-eyed, is the MFA’s.

The museum owns it, and owns up, in more ways than one: For the installation, it commissioned “Ié,” a huge triptych by Lucy Dodd. Her three panels dwarf everything else here; like the show itself, she’s engaged with history, but not reverential to it. The piece is part dynamic landscape painting — inspired by the wash of sea and sand, with base elements including salt water from Cape Cod, squid ink, and seaweed — and part swirling, milky abstraction. It defies old categories simply by being.

Visitors check out Lucy Dodd's "Ié" at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

American Modernism, at least in the popular view, has been dominated for generations by the Museum of Modern Art, which carved its taut line through Impressionism to Abstract Expressionism and declared that all, henceforth, would flow from there. But after a six-month hiatus, MoMA reopened earlier this year with newfound complexity, vast rafts of historic omissions now subsumed in its display. With it came an implicit admission: Its work had been too narrow, too exclusive and over-defined.

Museums have been adjusting their offerings along these lines for years, but the MoMA reopening was a watershed. Museums like the MFA used to be doomed to inadequacy, with the likes of MoMA acting as the standard. But when that standard flexes and cracks open — when, ultimately, no one is right — what were once unforgivable gaps can be opportunities. That's the position taken by "Five Propositions," which unabashedly throws together artists unstuck in time and context: Wolfgang Tillmans's "Silver," from 2014, a muddy brew of ochre and violet made by dirtying up photo paper while processing, across from Warhol's "Oxidation Painting," from 1978, with its metallic

patina achieved by pouring urine on a canvas of copper paint. It all feels like a declaration of freedom: Old rules pushed aside, all bets off. Greenberg would be appalled, and that's a good thing.

"Five Propositions" is determined to link visions across eras, ignoring old boundaries with often unsettling results. In the proposition called "Imaginary Beings," Joan Brown's "Grey Cat with Madrone and Birch Trees," from 1968, looks rough and neglected, maybe the product of being abandoned in storage for too long. But it's in good company for sheer uneasy weirdness with Alice Neel's "Symbols (Doll and Apple)," a folksy little terror from 1932, and Georg Baselitz's "Lazarus," a huge 1984 canvas that quakes with color and gestural force.

Alice Neel's "Symbols (Doll and Apple)" from 1932. MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON/© MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

The show, quietly, allows the culture wars and identity politics to seep in (with no fanfare, the entire show is in perfect gender balance, 50/50 men to women). Proposition three, “Sculpture,” is unmistakably feminine: Simone Leigh’s frank, combative “No Face (Pannier),” from 2018, is a female figure in a grass skirt, naked from the waist up with her hands defiantly on hips, her head a wreath of small, sharp seashells. Julia Phillips’s “Objectifier I, Slightly Used (#3),” is slim with sharp prongs, which unnerves given the title. Proposition Four, simply called “Material,” has a similarly thinly veiled intent: Julian Schnabel’s 1988 “Ragazzo Padre” — a massive canvas, raw and rough, big as a house — bumps up against Lynda Benglis’s “Wing,” from 1970, steely and soft. It doesn’t back down from Schnabel’s overbearing machismo one bit.

A final proposition is called “Utopia,” a fittingly loose and idealistic conclusion for a display where looseness, more than anything, is the theme. It’s small, with a blinding cluster of Dan Flavin’s fluorescent tubes gleaming bright-white on the far wall — the piece, from 1964, is called “Monument for V. Tatlin,” in honor of the Russian artist and architect with grand idealist visions. In the middle of the space is Isa Genzken’s “Gaudi,” a stout section of crumbling concrete wall perched at eye-level on a metal stand. Behind it is Peter Fischli and David Weiss’s “Honor, Courage and Confidence” from 1984, a grainy photograph of a bottle balanced on the handle of a wood saw, its blade bent double and embedded into a half-sawed plank.

Some history: Vladimir Tatlin imagined a towering monument to Communism, which collapsed before it could be built. Genzken, who grew up in a divided Germany, would know a thing or two about walls and their tendency to come down. Get the metaphor?Like Fischli and Weiss’s picture, history of all kinds has been balanced on the head of a pin, managed beyond reason and good sense to keep things upright. Now’s the time: Let it all come down.

CONTEMPORARY ART: FIVE PROPOSITIONS

At Museum of Fine Arts, 465 Huntington Ave., through May 5, 2020. 617-267-9300, www.mfa.org