

VISUAL ARTS

CHARLES DESMARAIS *Art*

Provocative pieces of history on view

Guggenheim display clearly commercial, yet intriguing

Street-level art galleries on prime downtown San Francisco blocks tend to be flashy affairs. Something has to pay those rents, and displaying works that might dazzle tourist eyeballs seems to be a common strategy to promote sales.

Among several such establishments along a stretch of Geary Street, the Weinstein Gallery elbows itself to the fore. A graphic image, taller than most men, of a rat in a Che Guevara-style beret fills the glassed entrance. It's part of a mural work by the artist Banksy, painted on a hunk of house siding, controversially torn from its social context and presented as a collectible trophy. An Elgin Marbles story for our time.

Elsewhere in the gallery, minor works are pedestaled like museum pieces. Interspersed are works of genuine interest and historical value, though even these are often gussied up by gilt and other high-end frames out of keeping with the works they contain.

But amid the glitz, a trio of striking abstract paintings on an entry wall announces "Making the Museum of Non-Objective Painting: The Birth of the Guggenheim," an exhibition meant to set a starkly different tone. Climb the narrow stairs to the third floor, brushing past drawings and small paintings of increasingly profound seriousness. You eventually land, not at a place, but at a moment: when the history of American art was being written.

"The Birth of the Guggenheim," which runs through June 30, is deeply flawed as an exhibition. Spotlit more like a jewelry store than an art presentation, it is over-bright, and the paintings, I suspect, have been over-cleaned. Some 50 works spill beyond the main exhibition space, cramming hallways and an occupied office. It was "curated" by dealers with something to sell, and the catalog draft I saw lacks rigor of research or thought. Drawn from sales galleries, private collections and Weinstein's own back rooms, it is incomplete without the works of some key artists.

It is not a work of serious

scholarship, but it is an opportunity to see — even to buy — important art that has been largely passed over by the mainstream, and rarely shown outside New York. I'm tempted to say it is a chance to play Solomon Guggenheim, looking at art without the benefit and the burden of history's judgment.

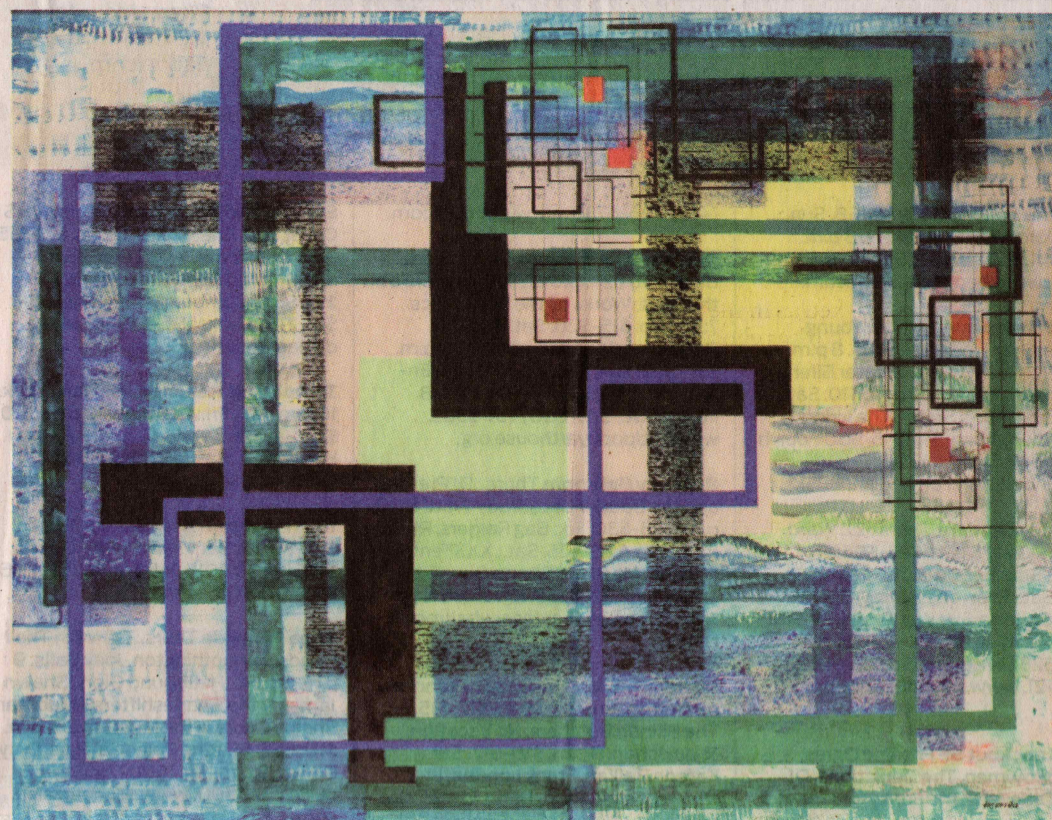
It's a squishy thing, art history. Art objects have their own lives, independent of our reactions to them, outside of what may be said about them. But the value we ascribe to them (cultural, monetary or otherwise) is entirely a function of the actions of imperfect people.

"The Birth of the Guggen-

heim" has a backstory full of such imperfections. It started with Solomon Guggenheim's beguilement by the Baroness Hildegard Anna Augusta Elisabeth Rebay von Ehrenwiesen, known as Hilla Rebay, whom he met in 1926 and who became his art adviser (and, probably, lover). It is grounded in the idea of "the spiritual in art" as



"Symphony" (1919-23) is by Rudolf Bauer, whose tale is part of a titillating history.



Weinstein Gallery photos

"Seven Red Squares" (1951) by Irene Rice Pereira, whose work is rarely seen in this area.

"Making the Museum of Non-Objective Painting: The Birth of the Guggenheim": 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays. Free. Weinstein Gallery, 383 Geary St., S.F. (415) 362-8155. www.weinstein.com

expressed by the pioneer abstract artist Wassily Kandinsky (whose work, regrettably, is not in this exhibition).

That backstory ends with the ultimate frustration of Guggenheim's dream to make a permanent home for what they all thought of as a post-abstract, nonobjective art. After his death in 1949, his heirs changed the name of his project (he had once considered Temple of Non-Objectivity) to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, broadened its mandate and fired Rebay from her job as director.

Along the way, personal misunderstandings and betrayals abounded. One of the most significant had to do with the rise and fall of a painter named Rudolf Bauer, whose work — which looks an awful lot like Kandinsky's, to judge by the current presentation — formed the core of Guggenheim's extensive collection at one point. It was relegated to the museum's storage rooms once Rebay, Bauer's lifetime supporter (and, certainly, lover), was out of the picture.

Which brings us to the show at hand, which consists of works by artists who were in Solomon Guggenheim's collection during the height of his and Rebay's most active years. It is a lively exhibition with some tantalizing objects. Bauer's work is particularly well represented (Weinstein Gallery represents the estate, but says all but one of the paintings here came from other sources). Included, thankfully, are strong works from the 1940s by several women rarely shown in these parts, among them Rebay, Alice Trumbull Mason and Irene Rice Pereira. A series of small paintings by Charles Green Shaw has the combined charm of Joan Miró and Paul Klee, their obvious sources.

In this exhibition of the unfamiliar and the uncertified, though, you are — like Guggenheim — ultimately on your own.

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