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An important drop in SFMOMA bucket

New acquisitions reflect a shift in perception of art history

By Charles Desmarais

Neal Benezra would not be pinned down.

In February, the director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art granted an exclusive interview to The Chronicle.

He was seated at a round table in his office, flanked by the museum's senior curator of painting and sculpture, Gary Garrels, and its two top communications professionals, Jill Lynch and Jennifer Northrop.

The topic was the sale of a painting by Mark Rothko, the proceeds of which were to be used "to broadly diversify SFMOMA's collection," a phrase used repeatedly by the museum and its representatives. But neither Benezra nor Garrels would share the museum's collection goals with regard to diversity. Asked whether restrictions would be placed on

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Among SFMOMA's first 11 acquisitions with the proceeds of the sale of a Rothko are, from top: Mickalene Thomas' "Qusuquzah, une très belle négresse 1" (2011), Forrest Bess' "Seascape With Star" and Leonora Carrington's "The Kitchen Garden on the Eyot" (1946).



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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

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use of the Rothko funds, Ben-
nezra simply said, “No.”
The work was sold at Soth-
eby’s in May for \$50.1 million,
netting the museum \$42.8
million after commission and
expenses. This week, the
museum announced its first 11
acquisitions. More purchases
will come later this year, and
“a sizable amount” of the
money will be set aside as an
endowment to be called the
Peggy Guggenheim Fund,
recognizing the original donor
of the Rothko painting.
So have the funds been
used to make a difference in
the breadth of the collection
and its representation of fre-
quently marginalized groups?
The short answer is, un-
questionably. Just don’t ask
how much this changes.
The newly acquired group
of paintings and sculptures
includes works by six women
and at least six artists of col-
or. At least two LGBTQ art-
ists and three artists known
for work they produced in
Latin America are also in-
cluded. Obviously, there is
overlap, but none of the new
acquisitions is by a straight
white male.
The museum says there are
approximately 2,400 paintings
and sculptures among the
museum’s 47,500 objects. Add
to that some 835 Fisher Col-
lection works, many of them
very large, which will contin-
ue to take up most of three
floors of the museum for
another 97 years or more.
It’s a nudge on the surface,
but 11 works do not make
much of a dent.
Not all of the artists in the
museum database are identi-
fied by gender and ethnicity,
but of those who are, 28% are
women and 10% are artists of
color, SFMOMA says. (An
independent study by a Wil-
liams College researcher, re-
leased this year, estimated
female artists in the
SFMOMA collection at 18.1%.)
Separating creative people
into such categories is an odd
way to make art decisions,
you might say, and you would
be right. But we have to start
somewhere to correct the
skewed image that we,
through our mainstream in-
stitutions, have created of the
history of art.
That’s why I’m encouraged
to see that six of the 11 works
were made in or before 1960.
The others are more contem-
porary, though only three
were made in this century.
I was granted access to the
new works at the museum on
Wednesday. On my tour
through storage rooms and
the conservation lab, Garrels
and SFMOMA curator Janet
Bishop provided informative
running commentary on the
rich provenance of many of
the works. Bishop acknowl-
edged the groundbreaking
work of Whitney Chadwick,
an art historian who lives in
San Francisco, whose 1985
book “Women Artists and the
Surrealist Movement” was an
eye-opener for many.
Two choices, both with
strong overtones of Surre-
alism, reflect Chadwick’s in-
fluence. Leonora Carrington’s
“The Kitchen Garden on the
Eyot” (1946) is a compact



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Frank Bowling’s “Elder Sun Benjamin” (2018) is a majestic 17 feet long, with detail this photo doesn’t do justice to.



© Barry McGee

Barry McGee’s piece was once bought for \$75 at a sidewalk sale.

painting, less than 2 feet
across, packed with mysteri-
ous allusion (starting with the
title’s obscure word for a
small island). The work,
which the museum now dedi-
cates to Chadwick in its regis-
tration record, was first
owned by the photographer
and designer Sir Cecil Beaton,
who purchased it from the
prominent Pierre Matisse
Gallery.
“Midnight Street” (1944) by
Kay Sage is another enigmatic
small work, which may owe a
debt to the well-known Surre-
alist painter Yves Tanguy,
whom Sage married in 1940.
It is bolder in form than most
Tanguy works, however, a
signal marker on the verge of
a dark and broken desert
floor.
Two related sculptures

made in 1960 by Lygia Clark
were purchased directly from
members of the artist’s family.
They are classic examples of
so-called Neo-Concretism, a
Brazilian art movement in
which Clark played a central
role. One of the two is a pre-
cariously balanced fold of cut
and hinged sheet metal that
appears to change from every
aspect; the other is a hand-
made balsa wood maquette
for the larger work. A third,
intermediate version was
purchased by board President
Robert Fisher and is a prom-
ised gift to the museum.
Forrest Bess was a vision-
ary artist whose famously
idiosyncratic sexual theories
seem, somehow, to offer cues
to his meditative landscapes.
His tiny “Seascape With Star,”
was painted around 1949,

Garrels surmised. A flesh-
colored sea roils with blood-
red waves, under a sky of
solid black. An inscription on
the back is likely a reference
to the visions Bess claimed
were the source of his imag-
ery. “There was a variation,”
the artist wrote. “The star
turned into a sun with many
satellites. ... It will not be
painted.”
SFMOMA adds substantial-
ly to the representation of
African American artists in
its collection with this group
of works. Paintings by at least
four artists of African heri-
tage are included, including a
classic 1956 work by Norman
Lewis, “Twilight,” a semi-
abstract land-
scape rich in
blacks and
browns, dis-
turbed by the
faintest cracks
of light.
“Cumulus”
(1972) by Alma
Thomas is a
6-foot-high cas-
cade of light
and — atypic-
ally, from what I
know of her
work — pastel
color. Garrels positively
gushed over the painting, but
here is a case where greater
depth in holdings of a single
artist would help us make
better sense of the career.
If ever one needed a lesson
in the inadequacy of repro-
duction of works of art, they
would do well to compare the
printed page to the painting
“Elder Sun Benjamin” (2018),
by Frank Bowling. At 17 feet
long and 10 feet high, it is
majestic in scale, and its vivid
stripes of blue, yellow and red
are turbulently handworked
up close. Other details are
nearly lost, as well. Strips of
the Dutch cloth popular in
parts of Africa separate the
work’s three sectors; stencils
of what appear to be ornate
brackets adorn the upper blue
field, as if to support the
painting from the top; one of
a pair of window-like circles
near the center holds a barely

visible photograph of the
artist’s grown “sun.”
A 2011 painting by Micka-
lene Thomas, 8 feet high and
adorned with rhinestones, is
similarly deceptive in a pho-
tograph. It is a portrait of the
formidable Qusuquzah, “a
very beautiful Negress,” the
title tells us, and a frequent
subject for Thomas.
Two later works, “Tarpau-
lin No. 1” (2018), a ceramic
sculpture by the Canadian
indigenous artist Rebecca
Belmore, and an untitled
painting from about 1993 by
San Francisco “Mission
School” artist Barry McGee,
round out the group. Neither
was available for viewing. The
Belmore is im-
possible to deci-
pher from the
reference pho-
tograph provid-
ed to me. It was
included in a
retrospective
exhibition of
her work at
Toronto’s Art
Gallery of On-
tario.
The McGee, a
partial gift and
purchase from
Darryl Smith, the co-founder
of San Francisco’s beloved
Luggage Store Gallery, is a
fragment from a larger work
included in one of McGee’s
first museum exhibitions. The
artist honed his style on the
streets of the Bay Area, and
this early work exemplifies
the bold forms of his graffiti
writing. It is fitting that Smith
saw the work from his car,
rescuing it, he said in a
phone call, for \$75 from a
sidewalk sale.
The newly acquired works
will go on view in August,
“threaded through the collec-
tion” on various floors of the
museum, according to Gar-
rels.
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Francisco Chronicle’s art critic.
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**SFMOMA adds
substantially to
the representation
of African
American artists
in its collection
with this group of
works.**