

What the new building, works within are saying

By Charles Desmarais

In this watershed year for art in the Bay Area, this weekend stands out, with Sunday's opening of a new building for the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. The inaugural exhibition, a sprawling affair of some 280 works drawn upon the art of several centuries and a world of cultures, lays out a kind of history of futures, a survey of a broad range of understandings of cosmological design.

At the same time, set in the context of the building that houses it, the show reminds us of how much has changed — in art and in the larger culture — over the half-century of the museum's existence. An unintended melancholy blankets the exhibition as we compare the works it comprises — visionary conceptions of multiple worlds, external and internal — to the earthbound realities of our current moment.

Abandoning the old

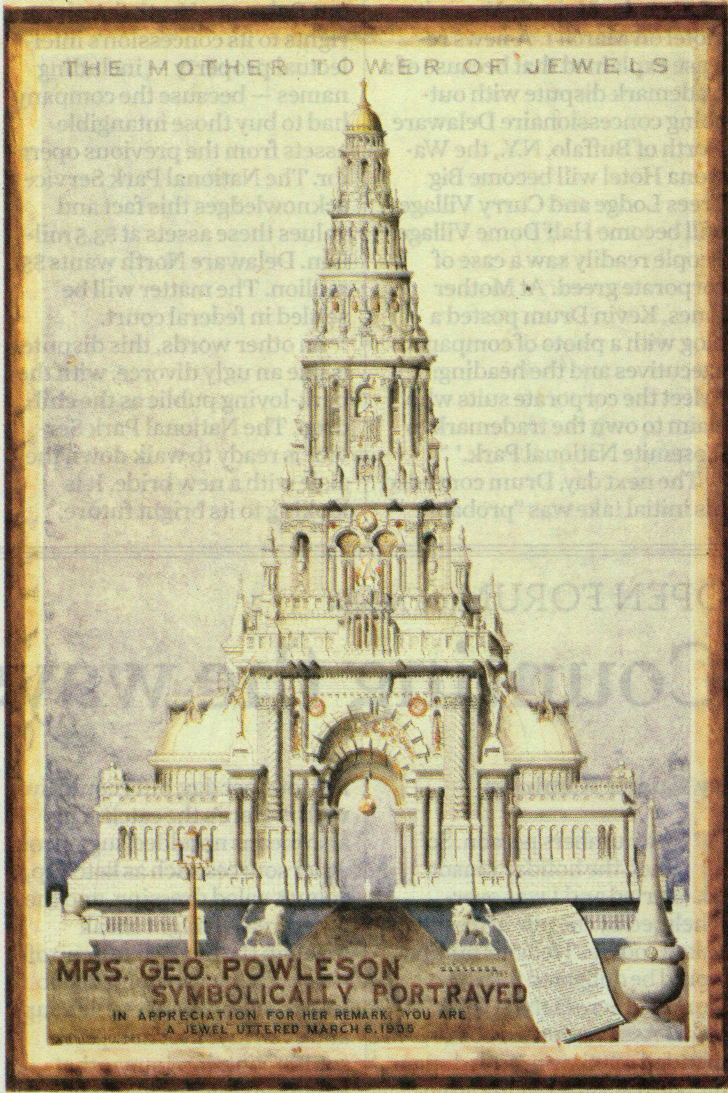
Even as we celebrate an unveiling, we mark the end of an art historical era. The stylish new facility will satisfy many of the museum's long-unmet needs. But the abandonment of the museum's most important and irreplaceable work of art, its Mario Ciampi-designed architectural masterpiece — its home for 44 years — says much about what our culture has lost. In 1970, we could imagine the New Art Museum, meant to house an art for a new consciousness. Alfred Frankenstein, my predecessor at The Chronicle then, called the interior "like none other you have ever seen," with a "grandeur about it which takes your breath away." With galleries that were massive, poured-concrete plates that seemed to float, spiraling into a vast gray cavern of man-made stone, the building was, at last, the realization of 18th century fantasies drawn by the Italian theorist Giovanni Piranesi.

If the old BAMPFA building was imagination concretized, the new one is a tool. It's so practical that its design started as a way to save money by reusing an old printing plant. Its well-proportioned galleries ("serene," museum Director Lawrence Rinder calls them), good light and easy flow will be appreciated by all who use it. Its exterior spine of stainless steel is a modish identifier of the building's public function. It is the perfect building for those who despised the Ciampi structure's perpetually avant-garde obstreperousness. The perfect cure for an age that repeatedly describes itself as "in recovery."

If I'm going on about the contrasts between new and old, it's because Rinder got me thinking about it. His opening exhibition, "Architecture of Life," is as adventuresome and expansive as his new building is polite. The show is, implicitly and surely unwittingly, a critique of the planning and architectural decisions that led to the new building — decisions in which the director played a major role.

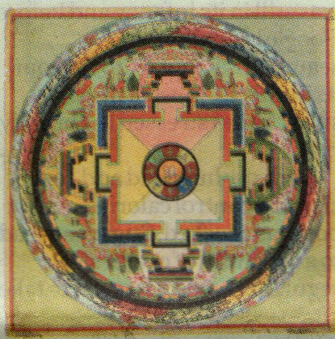
The exhibition proposes, in the words of Rinder's catalog essay, no more than to "present revelatory images and objects that stimulate reflection." It succeeds on those forgiving terms, turning up some real gems (rarely seen drawings, in particular — bring your reading glasses) and broadly construing art to include architecture, craft, design, traditional baskets and quilts, ritual objects, and scientific documents.

While the show itself self-consciously avoids any fixed starting point, Rinder begins his essay with some thoughts on what he calls a "visceral architecture." And here, with a comparison of a hypothetical project by the Austrian American theorist Frederick Kiesler



Ames Gallery, Berkeley

A.G. Rizzoli, "Mrs. Geo. Powleson Symbolically Portrayed / The Mother Tower of Jewels" (1935), ink on rag paper.



Sibila Savage / BAMPFA

Mandala of Buddhakapala, Tibet (19th-20th century).

to BAMPFA's Diller Scofidio + Renfro design, we see the gulf between soaring aspiration and pragmatic resignation. Where DS+R uses red paint to symbolically stand for guts, Kiesler envisioned, in a 1959 model included in the show, an "Endless House" of floors that twisted to become walls, ribboning through the interior. It was to be a space of ever-changing perspectives and overlapping (ruminant?) functions — a truly alimentary alternative to what he derisively called "the mysticism of hygiene" of the mid-20th century home.

Enlisting spiders to create sculptures of astonishing delicacy, Tomás Saraceno examines the eminently rational, utterly mysterious structural systems of their woven webs. It's a sure bet that the darkened room devoted to just five pieces, all created in interspecies partnership, will be the popular hit of the exhibition. But it also challenges us to consider, if only as metaphor, an architecture for a world that seems in the process of a slow shattering, a splintering that will require some yet-unrevealed logic if it is to be rebound.

Questioning limits

By contrast, the late Fred Sandback famously explored limits on the far opposite side of the possible. A simple triangle of yarn becomes a drawing in space, defining a plane that is as palpable as it is violable. It is the quintessential expression of our conflicted yearnings for order and freedom, of our need for both the physical and the transcendent.

Maps once used in the Marshall Islands of Micronesia, navigation charts made of bound sticks and cowrie shells, recorded the world as both static and changeable: They showed the geographic relationships of islands, but also indicated the direction and flow of ocean swells. Similarly, the best-known work of

Architecture of Life: Community Day (free admission for all) 11 a.m.-11 p.m. Jan. 31. Ongoing: 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Wednesdays-Sundays. Feb. 3-May 29. \$10-\$12; free for age 18 and under. UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2155 Center St., Berkeley. (510) 642-0808. www.bampfa.org.

artist Julie Mehretu, represented in the exhibition by a print of exquisitely fine lines and shadings, implies a record of measured progression, points of concurrence and disharmony, motion and stasis.

For a museum that has justifiably prided itself for many years on its attention to the now, the exhibition is decidedly historical, with only a quarter of the works made since the turn of the century, and something like half dated before the museum's founding in 1963.

Masterworks of past

That's hardly a negative. I am as excited to see George Ohr's 100-plus-year-old expressionist ceramics — complex models of the world in the guise of pitchers and vases — or a 6-foot-high, 16th century lace diagram of a "Dream of Nebuchadnezzar" — as I am to once again engage the pristine Ad Reinhardt "Abstract Painting" (1960-65) that is one of the crown jewels of the museum's collection.

At every turn, the exhibition makes a new case: For an architecture in constant regeneration, that melts away to be replaced by forms of infinite variety, suggested by Wilson Bentley's 1920s photographs of snowflakes made to bolster his now-accepted theory that no two snowflakes are the same. An openwork architecture of womb-like forms within forms, suggested by a noiselessly thrilling assembly of six hanging sculptures from the 1950s by Ruth Asawa. An architecture contained but of seemingly endless internal possibility, described by a grouping of 18 Tibetan mandalas from the 14th, 16th, 19th and 20th centuries.

In a world now so fraught with the ugly and dangerous, it is the case for an architecture of optimism, unbound from the restraints of the merely possible.

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