

SFMOMA ANNOUNCES 11 NEW ACQUISITIONS BY 10 MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS TO STRATEGICALLY DIVERSIFY THE COLLECTION

Newly Acquired Works Funded by Recent Rothko Sale Enhance the Museum's Contemporary Holdings



Alma Thomas, *Cumulus*, 1972; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, purchase, by exchange, through a gift of Peggy Guggenheim; © Estate of Alma Thomas; photo: Katherine Du Tiel

SAN FRANCISCO, CA (June 26, 2019, updated July 15, 2019)—The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) today announced 11 new acquisitions by 10 artists: Rebecca Belmore, Forrest Bess, Frank Bowling, Leonora Carrington, Lygia Clark, Norman Lewis, Barry McGee, Kay Sage, Alma Thomas and Mickalene Thomas. Acquisition of these works was funded by the deaccession and sale of Mark Rothko's *Untitled* (1960) earlier this spring. These acquisitions are part of an ongoing program funded by the sale of this painting with the goals of broadly diversifying the collection, enhancing modern and contemporary holdings and addressing historical gaps. The proceeds from this sale also will be used to create a new endowment fund for future acquisitions.

“This is just the beginning of what we will be able to accomplish with this fund, which allows us to broaden the scope of the stories we are able to tell in our galleries,” said Neal Benezra, Helen and Charles Schwab Director of SFMOMA. “With these works, many of which are the first by these extraordinary artists to enter our holdings, we will be able to recontextualize our permanent collection and the Fisher Collection and expand the art historical narratives we share with our visitors.”



Mickalene Thomas, *Qusuqzah, une très belle négresse 1*, 2011; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, purchase, by exchange, through a gift of Peggy Guggenheim; © Mickalene Thomas / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photo: Katherine Du Tiel

The new acquisitions span six decades and several genres, and in most cases, are SFMOMA’s first works by the respective artists. Included in this group of acquisitions are:

- *Tarpaulin No. 1* (2018) by Rebecca Belmore
- *Seascape with Star* (n.d.) by Forrest Bess
- *Elder Sun Benjamin* (2018) by Frank Bowling
- *The Kitchen Garden on the Eyot* (1946) by Leonora Carrington
- *Estudo para Bicho Pássaro do Espaço (maquette)* (1960) and *Bicho Pássaro do Espaço* (1960) by Lygia Clark
- *Twilight* (1956) by Norman Lewis
- *Untitled* (ca. 1993) by Barry McGee
- *Midnight Street* (1944) by Kay Sage
- *Cumulus* (1972) by Alma Thomas
- *Qusuqzah, une très belle négresse 1* (2011) by Mickalene Thomas

These works will be presented alongside existing collection works throughout the museum beginning in late August 2019.

The acquisition effort was led by Gary Garrels, Elise S. Haas Senior Curator of Painting and Sculpture, and Janet Bishop, Thomas Weisel Family Chief Curator and Curator of Painting and Sculpture. Together Garrels and Bishop carefully considered the priorities for the collection and their alignment with SFMOMA's new strategic plan, which among many goals, aims to diversify the collection, staff and visitorship, and to underscore the museum's commitment to the art for our time.

"Works by these artists have long been on our wish list. We are thrilled that we can now finally make these acquisitions a reality," said Garrels. "The acquisition of these works, and many more to come, will enable the museum to better and more fully represent the art for our time and bring a much richer array of artists' voices into the museum."



Frank Bowling, *Elder Sun Benjamin*, 2018; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, purchase, by exchange, through a gift of Peggy Guggenheim; © Frank Bowling; photo: Katherine Du Tiel

REBECCA BELMORE

Rebecca Belmore's *Tarpaulin No. 1* (2018) is a large ceramic sculpture made from a cast mold. The smudges of black across the sand-colored sculpture evoke an urban grittiness, yet there is a softness in the curve over what appears to be a figure kneeling or hunching. Underneath the sculpture, a void represents the homeless—a percentage of which is made up of people with indigenous backgrounds. This sculpture—the first work by Belmore to enter SFMOMA's collection—strengthens the museum's holdings and representation of native, indigenous and aboriginal art. *Tarpaulin No. 1* further resonates with existing holdings categorized as body, performance and feminist art.

Based in Vancouver, British Columbia, Belmore is an Anishinaabe artist and a member of the Lac Seul First Nation. Her multidisciplinary practice includes performance, installation, photography, sculpture and video. Throughout her over 30-year career, Belmore has produced artwork that raises awareness about indigenous history and culture, racial stereotyping, language loss, violence against women and natural resources.

FORREST BESS

Seascape with Star (n.d.) is imbued with symbolic content that the artist himself did not understand and sought for decades to decipher, a symbolism associated with his search to find a hermaphroditic sexual identity. Formally, the painting is notable for its richly worked surface and its blocks of color.

Bess's painting finds context in the work of his California peer Lee Mullican and earlier American modernists such as Marsden Hartley and Arthur Dove.

Bess spent his life on the Gulf Coast of Texas, where he worked as a fisherman and bait catcher. In 1934, he began painting professionally, creating commissioned portraits of houses, dogs and people, along with paintings based on his dreams. Beginning in the early 1950s, despite his isolation, Bess achieved recognition in New York. He showed regularly with the Betty Parsons Gallery and his work was championed by the eminent art historian Meyer Schapiro, with whom he engaged in ongoing correspondence.

FRANK BOWLING

Made on a monumental scale with a bold geometric composition reminiscent of a national flag, *Elder Sun Benjamin* (2018) continues Frank Bowling's long explorations on postcolonial states, territories and migration with subtle allusions to his own autobiography. The addition of this significant composition, Bowling's first to enter SFMOMA's collection, bolsters the museum's rich holdings of international postwar abstraction; furthers SFMOMA's continued commitment to the art for our time; and adds to the institution's growing collection of recent works by black artists.

Bowling was born in Bartica, Guyana (then colonial British Guiana), in 1934. After moving to England, Bowling first worked in a figurative style as part of the British Pop movement in the 1960s before making significant contributions to abstraction after he moved to New York in 1966. In his work across six decades and three continents, Bowling has continued to push the bounds of abstraction, offering poignant reflections on migration, multicultural experience and postcolonial history.

LEONORA CARRINGTON

Painted in Mexico City in 1946, *The Kitchen Garden on the Eyot* was completed just days before the birth of the artist's first son. This highly detailed painting connects to the artist's physical and spiritual experience of pregnancy, symbolically exploring issues of fertility and gender within a landscape populated by mythological figures and animals and referencing the formal gardens of her British childhood. Along with Dorothea Tanning's *Self-Portrait* (1944, acquired by SFMOMA in 2015) and a newly acquired painting by Kay Sage, *The Kitchen Garden on the Eyot* augments the museum's holdings by women Surrealists, a historically overlooked gap in the collection.

Carrington was born in 1917 in Clayton Green, Lancashire, in the north of England. In the late 1930s, she became closely involved with the Surrealist movement in Europe. In 1942, Carrington moved to Mexico City, where she joined a growing community of European exiles. The artist spent most of her mature career in Mexico City, where she lived and worked until her death in 2011.

LYGIA CLARK

Bicho Pássaro do Espaço (Critter Bird in Space) and its accompanying *Estudo para Bicho Pássaro do Espaço* are sculptures built from planes and articulated through a series of hinges, which allow them to be manipulated, configured and reconfigured in a range of forms. An additional related work, a metal maquette of *Bicho Pássaro do Espaço* (1960), is a promised gift to the museum, making SFMOMA the only public collection with examples of all three stages of development for one of Clark's *Bichos*. The first works by Clark to enter SFMOMA's collection, these playful and interactive sculptures strengthen the museum's growing holdings and strategic commitment to the representation of Latin American modern and contemporary art.

Clark was born in 1920 in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. She was an integral member of two of the most important avant-garde movements in Brazilian and Latin American art history: the Grupo Frente and the Movimento Neoconcreto. In the 1960s, Clark's works became increasingly experiential and collective. Since her death in 1988, Clark has been celebrated as one of the most radical artists of the postwar period.

NORMAN LEWIS

In Norman Lewis's *Twilight* (1956), an array of red, orange and green hues flicker through a ground of deep earthen tones, suggesting dappled light peeking through the branches of a tree. This painting represents the height of the artist's abstract works of the 1950s, characterized by an interest in nature, spirituality and calligraphic gestures. Lewis's association with Abstract Expressionism makes his work an important addition to the collection, and allows SFMOMA to present a fuller and more complex history of the art of this time.

Lewis was born in 1909 and raised in Harlem to immigrant parents from Saint Kitts. Like many artists associated with the WPA in the 1930s, Lewis began as a figurative painter, creating works in the socialist realist style and tackling subjects such as poverty and social injustice. After World War II, Lewis shifted course and began to make lyrically abstract paintings, imbued with references to East Asian calligraphy and European modernism. Lewis is among the most prominent African-American artists to be associated with the first generation of Abstract Expressionism.

BARRY MCGEE

Untitled (ca. 1993) is a rare example of Barry McGee's early work, much of which is lost to time. With its loose, spray-painted imagery, white drips and red background, this piece offers an exceptional snapshot of the artist's style as it came into being and retains a strong link to San Francisco's graffiti underground. *Untitled* joins a major installation of McGee's *Untitled* (1996/2009), as well as important works by fellow Mission School artists Margaret Kilgallen, Alicia McCarthy and Chris Johanson in SFMOMA's collection, which is now poised to present the work of this art community with notable breadth. The acquisition also allows the museum to offer a fuller picture of McGee's career.

McGee has become synonymous with the Bay Area's unique street art legacy. Born in 1966 outside San Francisco, McGee took inspiration from the hand-painted car detailing of his father, an automobile mechanic, and the emerging graffiti scene in and around Chinatown. In 1984, he began tagging under the moniker Twist. For McGee, the street art community was an art world without barriers to entry.

KAY SAGE

Sage's exquisitely painted *Midnight Street* (1944) features the glowing white folds of a sail set against a deep blue sky. Rife with mystery, the canvas marks the first appearance of an open scaffolding, which would become one of the artist's most important motifs from that point forward. As Sage's first work to enter SFMOMA's collection, *Midnight Street* finds immediate context with the work of other Surrealists including recently acquired works by Leonora Carrington and Dorothea Tanning. *Midnight Street* also relates to the evocative sculptural forms of Alexander Calder, who was Sage's longtime Connecticut neighbor.

Sage was born outside Albany, New York, in 1898, and traveled extensively during a childhood spent primarily on the East Coast. In the 1920s and 1930s, she lived in Rome and Paris, where she became part of the Surrealist community. While Sage's earliest works are academic, by the late 1930s she began applying her painterly gifts to a style of tightly controlled illusionism that drew the attention of

the Surrealists. Sage returned to the U.S. in 1939, and lived and worked first in New York and then Connecticut, where she maintained her primary residence from the early 1940s until her death in 1963.

ALMA THOMAS

Cumulus (1972) is among the most richly painted, sumptuous and subtlest works of Alma Thomas's career. The large-scale work encapsulates the singularity and distinction of her contribution to contemporary abstract painting. Her first work to enter SFMOMA's collection, *Cumulus* fills an important gap in the museum's holdings and relates to the work of Washington Color Field painters and Abstract Expressionists, as well as other abstract artists for whom color is an essential and salient element.

Born in Columbus, Georgia, in 1891, Thomas moved with her family to Washington, D.C., to escape racial violence and have access to improved education. She took her first art classes during high school before continuing on to Howard University where she pursued studies in the fine arts and began her first experiments with abstraction. Painting became her primary activity after her retirement from teaching. By the late 1960s, Thomas had developed a distinct personal style of painting, composing with short, segmented strokes arranged in generally adjacent and almost abutting bands. In 1972, at the age of 81, Thomas was the first African-American woman to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

MICKALENE THOMAS

Qusuqzah, une très belle négresse 1 (2011) is a monumental three-quarter-length portrait of one of Thomas' frequent models, Qusuqzah, a transgender woman. Inspired by Édouard Manet's *La Négresse (The Negro Woman)* from 1862, and rooted in a refusal to believe in the invisibility of the black woman, Thomas's portrait repositions her model as a beautiful black figure who cannot be overlooked. This painting joins Thomas's *Sista Sista Lady Blue* (2007), a photograph that represents the artist's signature 1970s style, in SFMOMA's collection. This addition not only strengthens the museum's holdings of paintings by contemporary African-American artists, it also enhances a strong collection of black American portraiture.

Thomas was raised by her mother and grandmother in New Jersey during the 1970s, an era that continues to influence her work. Thomas began as an abstract painter inspired by Australian Aboriginal art and late 19th-century French Pointillism. In graduate school at Yale University School of Art, she started exploring photography as references for her paintings, but felt limited by using only oil paint. Eventually she began applying glitter and later rhinestones, which would become her signature material. At Yale, Thomas also decided to focus her subjects on black women as a way to address their absence in European art history.

SUMMER HOURS AND ADMISSION

May 19 through September 2, 2019: Open Sunday–Tuesday and Friday 10 a.m.–5 p.m., Thursday and Saturday 10 a.m.–9 p.m. Closed Wednesday.

Visitors aged 18 years and younger receive free admission to the museum, including special exhibitions. Adult general admission to SFMOMA is \$25; admission for seniors 65 years and older is \$22; and admission for visitors ages 19 through 24 is \$19.

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

151 Third Street
San Francisco, CA 94103

SFMOMA is dedicated to making the art for our time a vital and meaningful part of public life. Founded in 1935 as the first West Coast museum devoted to modern and contemporary art, a thoroughly transformed SFMOMA, with triple the gallery space, an enhanced education center and new free public galleries, opened to the public on May 14, 2016. Since its inaugural year, the expanded museum has welcomed more than one million visitors annually.

Visit sfmoma.org or call 415.357.4000 for more information.

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