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ART & DESIGN

Wagner Collection at the Whitney, 25 Years of Astute Buying

By ROBERTA SMITH DEC. 3, 2015

More collectors of contemporary art should follow the lead of Thea Westreich Wagner and her husband, Ethan Wagner. They are neither building a private museum to house their holdings nor sending their trove off to auction hoping for headline-grabbing profits, although this is partly because their purchases have not especially encompassed the so-called trophy art that earns such profits.

Instead, Ms. Westreich Wagner and Mr. Wagner are doing something that is, unfortunately, beginning to feel old-fashioned. They are giving a great deal of a strong collection with an independent bent to two museums historically committed to new art.

All told, some 850 works amassed mostly during, and mostly dating from, the last quarter-century will move house (but not quite yet — the majority are promised gifts). The Whitney Museum is receiving almost 550 works by artists born or based in the United States. The Pompidou Center in Paris will be the new home for 300 by artists based primarily in Europe.

These are exceptionally large gifts for both museums, but the Whitney's portion is momentous. Its arrival coincides neatly with the museum's move to a new, larger building last spring and its expanding cultural presence (although the dearth of nonwhite artists represented in this windfall runs counter to the Whitney's increased emphasis on inclusiveness).

The couple's largess is being celebrated here with an exhibition, "Collected by Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner," organized by Elisabeth Sussman, the Whitney's curator of photography, and Christine Macel, the Pompidou's chief curator. Of the 111 works they have selected, nearly 80 will become the Whitney's; just over 30 are destined for the Pompidou.

The show constitutes a first look at the gifts and how the collection came to be, while providing glimpses of some recent developments and flashes in the petri dish of art. In addition there's an imposing catalog with enough hosannas, self-congratulations (and also self-disclosures) and weird history — interesting but myopic — to make it a fascinating, even useful document.

It reveals a couple who seem to fall in love more with artists



Puppet versions of artists by Philippe Parreno and Rirkrit Tiravanija at the Whitney.

Jake Naughton for The New York Times

than art (a long tradition among collectors) and gives a full picture of the cliquishness on which the art world partly, and inevitably, runs. This world is a series of villages vying, consciously or not, for some kind of dominance or effect.

The interview and the curators' essays stress the collectors' avoidance of market darlings; those they own, they bought early. Still, the art world is shaped by different arbiters of fashion, including both the blue-chip art market and academic cachet. Ms. Westreich Wagner and Mr. Wagner have chosen the cachet, which is not any more predictive of historical importance than the marketplace, but which has higher status in many circles. After all, who doesn't want to be welcome in some of the hippest, most intimidating and, often, the smallest galleries in the art world? But only time will tell if the couple's choices are, as Mr. Wagner puts it, "for better or worse."

The show samples three or more decades of recent art on both sides of the Atlantic. It is a bit austere and short on color, with a broad slant toward conceptual/neo-conceptual art, to which the collectors freely admit, along with their lack of interest in much recent painting.

The display suggests that the curators wanted to make the collection look both historically correct and as with-it as possible. It is fairly predictable in the beginning, with its roster of 1980s and early '90s art stars and starlets (bought pre-stardom) and too thin toward the end, with a group of esoteric younger artists whose works look either intriguingly inscrutable or completely uninteresting if not silly.



A detail from a Christopher Wool work from 1990-91.
Jake Naughton for The New York Times

The catalog's lavish illustrations and list of the full gift suggest the possibility of a funkier, less orthodox show that might have included paintings by Ellen Berkenblit; Andrew Masullo; a young artist named Mathieu Malouf, whose two paintings incorporate mushrooms; as well as the eccentric artist Robert Melee. But nearly every criticism you can make of this show can be credibly countered: Predictable or not, this streamlined version may be the most comprehensible introduction to the Wagners' collection.

The gift bulks up the Whitney's holdings in big-name artists like Jeff Koons, Christopher Wool, Robert Gober and Richard Prince. It adds substantial works by major figures like the Minimalist Dan Flavin and the nonconformist Richard Artschwager as well as by overlooked artists like Tony Conrad, a filmmaker who makes wonderful film-related abstractions.

Its greatest breadth may lie in photography, where it astutely establishes a progression from relatively traditional practitioners like Robert Adams, Lee Friedlander, Diane Arbus and Weegee; through artists who manipulated straight photography, like Larry Clark, Philip-Lorca diCorcia and Zoe Leonard; to a loosely defined gathering of photo-based Pictures Generation artists like Mr. Prince, Cindy Sherman, James Welling and Sherrie Levine, who approached the medium as an object of critique; and beyond with artists who deconstruct the medium more literally, like Christopher Williams, Anne Collier and Liz Deschenes.

At times Americans may chafe at the Whitney's limiting purview, to artists based in this country, especially where art by young, globe-trotting artists is concerned. Some of the best works in the show are by the European contingent: Klara Liden, Hito Steyerl and Annette Kelm, who work mostly in Germany, and the British artists Merlin Carpenter and Simon Starling. Their work often has such a New York presence as to make you feel robbed.

If I had to choose one work to take home, it would be a snow-laden Christmas tree by the French artist Philippe Parreno titled "Fraught Times: For Eleven Months of the Year It's an Artwork, and in December It's Christmas (November)" from 2009. Particularly amusing, in a clubbish sort of way, is the nearby piece on which Mr. Parreno collaborated with the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija: 10 extraordinarily endearing puppets portraying some of the artists and curators associated with the rather full-of-itself relational aesthetics movement. (Coyly, no one is identified.) Above them hangs David Robbins's 1986 "Talent," a grid of glossy Hollywood-style head shots of 18 artists of his circle, all identified. It is humbling to realize how many of them have slipped from view, and memory.

The catalog interview with Ms. Westreich Wagner and Mr. Wagner gives a surprisingly forthright account of their involvement, separate and together, with art. He began as a collector of ceramics, she is an art adviser, and both published artists books. They speak of works they have sold, including paintings by Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke, to continue buying the art of the young and untried.



Lee Friedlander's 1997 photographs "Florida," left, and "Oregon."
Jake Naughton for The New York Times



Matias Faldbakken's locker sculpture.
Jake Naughton for The New York Times



“Bouquet III,” by Jeroen de Rijke and Willem de Rooij.
 Jake Naughton for The New York Times



“Les Goddesses,” a video by Moyra Davey at the Guggenheim’s
 “Photo-Poetics: An Anthology.”
 Moyra Davey and Murray Guy, New York

They also lament artists they didn’t acquire when they could still afford them (Pierre Huyghe and Liam Gillick). In this vein, they might have discussed why their gift does not represent certain high-profile artists from the galleries they favored, such as the painter Josh Smith, who first showed with the influential Reena Spaulings Fine Art and R. H. Quaytman, a primary figure at 47 Orchard, a subversive, short-lived artist-run space, who now shows with Miguel Abreu, a gallery high on the hip, intimidating list. Did they not like the work? Did they buy it and sell it? Are they holding it back for pleasure or for resale?

At times they seem to have listened more than looked, spoon-fed the artists’ “intentions” by the artists themselves or their dealers. They also seem a tad naïve about the power dynamic in the artist-collector relationship: Artists tend to be friendly to collectors because they want collectors to buy their work.

But never mind. Mainly what we have here, in this gift, show and catalog is a passionate involvement with the art of our time, elaborately revealed.

As is often noted, every art collection, public or private, is a work in progress. Ms. Westreich Wagner and Mr. Wagner intend to go on buying new art as it attracts them. And this show is but the beginning of a new life for the art they have given away, most of which we have yet to see. Its value and scope will emerge as it is integrated into the collections of the two museums, and as curators present and future begin to study and contextualize it. Artists can talk all they want about their intentions, but in the end the meanings of their work are a never-ending collaborative project, built by all of us.

“Collected by Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner” is on view through March 6 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 99 Gansevoort Street at Washington Street, Manhattan; 212-570-3600, whitney.org.

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