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ART: Contemporary artists inspired by the past

Museum collection serves as creative source

By Deborah K. Dietsch



Eager to inject contemporary art into the Phillips Collection, museum director Dorothy Kosinski has launched an appealing enterprise to integrate new and old works within the galleries.

Called "Intersections," the series invites contemporary artists to create pieces based on their reactions to treasures from the Phillips' holdings. Ms. Kosinski views the effort as extending founder Duncan Phillips' vision of the museum as both "an experiment station" and intimate place for considering the formal relationships among artworks.

"Duncan Phillips left a mandate to continue a vibrant dialogue with our time," she said during the opening of the series earlier this month.

The first installment of "Intersections" is a promising start to renewing this idea. It places contemporary art — a video, a sculpture and wall reliefs — within the older spaces of the museum rather than a separate gallery so they blend into the collection.

The juxtaposition encourages a fresh view of familiar 19th- and 20th-century paintings as seen through the eyes of three female artists: New Yorker Jennifer Wen Ma, Washingtonian Barbara Liotta and Rhode Island-based Tayo Heuser.

The trio was chosen by Vesela Sretenovic, the Phillips' curator of modern and contemporary art, who has tapped four more women to intersect with the collection in the future. So far, the series is a welcome departure from the typical male-dominated exhibitions in the art world.

Even without making the comparisons to older works, viewers will find much to enjoy in the inaugural "Intersections" within the staircase and third-floor galleries of the converted house.

The most unconventional of the contemporary pieces is shown in the most traditional of spaces, a room with a fireplace. Ms. Ma's video called "Brain Storm" isn't exactly new; it was first shown at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, but the artist added a soundtrack for the version at the Phillips.

The short film merges modern technology with Chinese ink painting on glass to animate the frames with fluid, cloudy effects. This Asian tradition reflects the heritage of the artist, who was born in China and recently worked in Beijing as part of the creative team behind the opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympic Games.

Drawings of a walking man followed by a horse are accompanied by various washes splashed across the scenes like changing weather.

Ms. Ma's inspiration came from Jacob Lawrence's "Migration Series," shown in an adjacent gallery, but unlike his black travelers, her subjects don't go anywhere. "Brain Storm" centers on the psychological terrain of dark moods and light moments with rumbling sounds similar to those heard when the ears are blocked.

Additional influences came from rhythmic landscapes by artists Paul Cezanne, Wassily Kandinsky and Arthur Dove shown in a room across the hall. The black-and-white video turns out to be more related to these colorful abstractions than it appears. According to Chinese tradition, ink has five colors and each of these hues has six gradations, offering as many variations as paint.

Not to be missed in a nearby gallery is Ms. Liotta's floor-to-ceiling sculpture rising in a corner of the space. Titled "Icarus," her suspended installation is named for the Greek mythological character who flew too close to the sun and fell into the sea.

Its wings are made of synthetic black cords with small rocks suspended from a central ridge of hanging fringe. This graceful arrangement of stones and strings creates an intriguing study of gravity and figural allusions.

So how does this installation relate to the five seemingly unrelated paintings in the room? The obvious answer seems to be the Argentine granite of the rough stones, which matches the rusty tones of the paintings and reddish color of the wooden gallery floor.

Ms. Liotta replies by comparing her sculpture to the character studies shown next to the piece, including paintings of a woman by Chaim Soutine and a painter at his easel by Honore Daumier.

She conceived "Icarus" as representing "the strong will to rise and soar," an ambition similarly expressed in the paintings, rather than a literal portrait of the Greek figure.

Her stone-bound installation also might be seen as the visual embodiment of a human spine and a stringed instrument, as expressed by the fiddler in Eugene Delacroix's "Paganini," which also hangs in the gallery.

Even without the paintings for comparisons, Ms. Liotta's sculpture succeeds in enlivening the space with the dynamism of a stretching dancer. Its power stems from the tension between the heavy stones and delicate webs, and the tightly controlled configuration of the piece.

More numerous but less engaging are Ms. Heuser's nine plaques on the walls of the staircase leading from the lobby gallery to the museum's upper levels. They offer quick blasts of color and pattern on the way to somewhere else.

These molded paper reliefs were modeled on Mark Rothko's meditative abstract paintings in the Phillips' famed Rothko Room. At the exhibit opening, Ms. Heuser said the wall sculptures' curving edges were influenced by the wavy lines in the lower corner of his painting "Ochre and Red on Red."

The title of her series, "Pulse," is meant to suggest Rothko's vibrating fields of colors but the bright, geometric motifs drawn onto Ms. Heuser's pieces appear precisely calibrated in contrast to the late painter's saturated hues. Their symmetrical patterns call attention to the wall sculptures' surfaces rather than pulling the viewer into their depths.

WHAT: "Intersections"

WHERE: Phillips Collection, 1600 21st Street Northwest

WHEN: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday; 10 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. Thursday; 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday; "Brain Storm" through Jan. 3; "Icarus" through Jan. 31; "Pulse" through Oct. 31

ADMISSION: \$12 adults, \$10 students and seniors on weekends; suggested donation on weekdays

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WEB SITE: www.phillipscollection.org