

THE WHITNEY OPENS WITH A WINNER

BY *Andrew Russett* POSTED 04/23/15 5:42 PM

Let's cut to the chase: the Whitney Museum of American Art's inaugural show in its new home in the Meatpacking District, "America Is Hard to See," is outstanding. With about 600 works by a little over 400 artists, it offers a history of American art—and America—that is richly textured and that teems with beloved classics and electrifying surprises. I am in love with it, and I suspect I will not be the only one.

The opening of Renzo Piano's building, which gives the Whitney about 63,000 square feet of exhibition space (inside and out), nearly twice what it had in the Breuer Building on the Upper East Side, was always going to be the event of the season in New York, but this exhibition, which borrows its title from a Robert Frost poem, means that we can all truly rejoice. It is a thrilling development for the city, and I am already fantasizing about—and bracing myself for—the wave of soon-to-be artists who will grow up with this space and be inspired by it.

From the moment you step off the elevator onto the eighth floor, where the show begins, you can sense the joy that its curatorial team—led by Donna De Salvo, the museum's chief curator, with Carter E. Foster, Dana Miller, Scott Rothkopf, Jane Panetta, Catherine Taft, Mia Curran—took in assembling it. Two Marsden Hartley masterpieces, each a century old, each flowing with coded patterns and brimming with an earthy, American-engineered modernism, greet you. It is an intimate, potent beginning.

And look, off to the right, just barely coming into sight, are two more beauties, by the great Florine Stettheimer, a lifelong New Yorker (save for a brief time in Germany) who is impossible to categorize—there's *Sun* (1931), a sparkling, fantastical scene that harbors oversized flowers, and *New York—Liberty* (1918), a whimsical but faithful look at the Southern tip of Manhattan from high in the sky. (It's the only piece borrowed from a private collection; everything else in the show belongs to the Whitney.) Taken together, these works propose a vision of American modernism that feels hearteningly contemporary—queer, alive to pleasure, aware of (but not smitten by) international avant-gardism, and maybe a little decadent.

As you walk on, you will find treasures you may remember from uptown, by Georgia O'Keeffe and Edward Hopper, Arthur Dove and Joseph Stella. But they are intermixed with lesser-known delights that almost always go toe to toe with the masters, gently suggesting reconsiderations of art history. There's Elsie Driggs's *Pittsburgh* (1927), a smoke-filled painting that takes as its subject large factory pipes and smokestacks that bulge with almost libidinal energy, and a charmingly mysterious little painting from 1918 of a mechanical device by Morton Schamberg, a Precisionist who died of the flu in New York two days before he would have turned 37.

The exhibition rolls along roughly chronologically, each section taking its name from a work within it. The self-explanatory "Breaking the Prairie" (after Grant Wood's 1935–39 study for the eponymous painting owned by Iowa State University) sits a floor below, and features a witty little drawing of a man on cardboard by the freed slave Bill Traylor between a Thomas Hart Benton and a Marsden Hartley—the self-taught and pedigreed hanging together, simple as pie.

The Hartley this time is a meaty portrait of a shirtless man from 1940, and one of the joys of the well-orchestrated display is being able to see an early work by an artist and then catch up with him again years later, after times have changed.

One can find, for instance, a vaguely de Chirico-esque Philip Guston drawing of Ku Klux Klan members from 1930 in a section about the Great Depression and World War II, visit with him in 1956 when he was working with his patchy pink-white abstractions in the requisite Ab-Ex section, and then finally spend some time with him in his prime, in a room of large-scale paintings from around the 1970s that features his *Cabal* (1977), a pile of eyeballs—or, perhaps, cyclopes—plopped on the ground in a dark room.

At a few points, I got goosebumps. Once was coming off the stairs into a room that shows ultra-cool Minimal painting ascendant around 1960—Jo Baer, Agnes Martin, Ad Reinhardt, John McLaughlin, Carmen Herrera, Ellsworth Kelly, and Frank Stella presented in the round, every painting a winner.

Another time was stepping out onto one of the museum's spacious outdoor decks to spend time with David Smith sculptures from the 1950s in front of a wide view of Manhattan, and then being able to look inside to a curvaceous mesh sculpture by the considerably less known Ruth Asawa that was hanging gingerly from the ceiling.

And another was seeing Lee Krasner's *The Seasons* (1957), a painting of swirling cranberries and limes, about 17 feet long, holding pride of place in that Ab-Ex room, across from a more modest piece by her husband Jackson Pollock.

There has been some grumbling about the lack of Color Field painting, but that seems a small price to pay in exchange for a room of contemporaneous, rough-and-tumble assemblage paintings and sculptures, by Bruce Connor, Jay DeFeo (*The Rose*, 1958–66), Lee Bontecou, Jim Dine, Raphael Montañez Ortiz (a violently ripped and twisted wall-hung piece from 1964), and Robert Rauschenberg (the 1955 *Satellite*, which has a quirky little taxidermy pheasant perched atop it).

I have a few complaints, but they seem unimaginably trivial in comparison to the overall triumph here, and are mostly about exercising my own taste in the most contemporary sections. (Basically, I could do without the large Carol Bove and Josephine Meckseper pieces.) Those contemporary areas seem a bit crowded and academic, and somewhat all over the place—one of this, one of that. But even there, incisive choices abound, like a janitorial trolley with 3D-printed body parts by Josh Kline and a painting of the World Trade Center, smoking, about to fall, by the underrated Keith Mayerson.



Josh Kline, *Cost of Living (Aleyda)*, 2014.

What lies beyond this opening exhibition? Upcoming shows sound promising, but we will have to cross our fingers and wait.

“America Is Hard to See” runs through September 27, and already I feel a little sad thinking about it going away, the collection space shrinking down to make way for special exhibitions. It is too soon to tell, but as they fill with crowds—and there will be crowds—one can imagine the newly enlarged Whitney soon feeling rather small.

But for now, while the show runs, we get to savor it. Countless minor, subtle decisions have yielded an exhibition that is by turns joyous, sinister, celebratory, and mournful. It is deeply considered, and deeply inspiring. I am looking forward to spending many long days with it.