

Smithsonian American Art Museum reopens modern, contemporary galleries

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The big omissions at the renovated Smithsonian American Art Museum

The one downside of inclusion? A lot of stuff gets left out.

Perspective by [Philip Kennicott](#)

Senior art and architecture critic

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Nam June Paik's "Electronic Superhighway: Continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii" is one of the monumental works that anchor the Smithsonian American Art Museum's newly renovated and installed modern and contemporary galleries. (Albert Ting/Smithsonian American Art Museum)



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For the first time since 2006, when it reopened after a major renovation to its home in the Old Patent Office Building, the [Smithsonian American Art Museum](#) has redesigned and reinstalled its collection of modern and contemporary art. The new rooms are brighter and more open, and deftly designed to include more wall space for art without compromising the flow of the Lincoln Gallery, the long, third-floor hall on the east side of the building where the 16th president held his second inaugural ball.

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Old favorites and essential icons of the museum's collection, including [Martin Puryear's](#) puzzle sculpture "[Vessel](#)" and [Nam June Paik's](#) giant video installation "[Electronic Superhighway: Continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii](#)," still anchor the display. But much is new and represents a concerted effort by the curators to diversify the art and artists represented. The museum has tabulated this down to precise numbers and percentages: Forty-two of the 100 or so works were acquired recently. Fifty-two percent are by artists of color and 42 percent by women, reflecting, according to the museum, "a more nuanced and representative survey of American art since 1945."

Big spaces invite big art, and most of what's on view feels monumental. Morris Louis's magnificent 1960 color abstraction "Beta Upsilon" and Alma Thomas's expansive study in red-and-white "[Red Azaleas Singing and Dancing Rock and Roll Music](#)" set the tone early in a gallery devoted to the Washington Color School (or DC Color Abstraction to use the museum's label), one of the few rooms that refer to an actual movement or stylistic affinity group. Even in the more intimate side spaces carved out of the larger Lincoln Gallery, the somewhat smaller artworks take on big subjects, including race and gender within a society that has systematically excluded people based on those categories.

Morris Louis's "Beta Upsilon," 1960, acrylic on canvas. (Smithsonian American Art Museum)

"It would be too simplistic to reduce the development of American art to a linear series of artistic movements since it is a messy, dynamic, ever-evolving history," museum director [Stephanie Stebich](#) said in a statement. The curators have pushed the erasure of chronology and "movements" further than other museums. A single, small gallery deals with what was once considered the dominant American contribution to 20th-century art — abstract expressionism — and another takes up feminist art. But except for a few passing references, there is nothing devoted to pop art, minimalism, [earth art](#) or queer art (except for a nod under the rubric of feminism).

The National Mall hosts its first, serious exhibition of contemporary art

And although there are artists from the West Coast represented, there are striking omissions for an installation covering the 1940s to the present. There is nothing by [Richard Diebenkorn](#), [Ed Ruscha](#) or [Wayne Thiebaud](#), artists associated with California — a coequal locus of creativity to New York and the East Coast — who project a sensibility distinctly different from that cultivated in New York.

One could go on, but what would be the point? Choices must be made. By foregrounding the essential importance of greater inclusivity, while focusing on large-scale, wall-filling works, the museum has set itself an unsolvable problem. How does one cover the breadth of contemporary American art when much of the space is devoted to art dependent on size for its impact?

So the larger loss, more significant than the disappearance of key artistic movements, is the loss of intimacy. Most of the work, even the smaller pieces, feels epic, cinematic or operatic, and one misses other, more inward modes of expression, like one of [Vija Celmins's](#) intensely engaged, [meticulous drawings of waves](#) rippling the ocean surface.

After touring these galleries, an outsider to American art might be justified in concluding that Americans speak only in the public mode, that we lack introspection and spend little if any time reflecting on love, loss, family or mortality. Landscape exists to register ideas, like

dispossession or despoliation, but not feelings. Portraiture registers ideas of kinship and belonging, or in the case of a few works by Diane Arbus, irony and alienation, but not the inner life.

There is much that is satisfying in the renovated space, and many of the artists new to the galleries are welcome additions. Grace Hartigan and Carmen Herrera should have been here long ago. It's good to see a fine, sensitive abstraction by Mary Pinchot Meyer, given how her art has been overshadowed by her personal life (an affair with John F. Kennedy) and death at age 43 (she was killed near the C&O Canal in Washington in 1964). Audrey Flack's 1976 "Queen," a painterly study in signs and symbols acquired last year, is a happy discovery. And Simon Gouverneur's 1989 "Mara," another recent acquisition, is one of the few new, larger works that carries with it a sense of deep personal, intimate engagement.

Audrey Flack's "Queen," 1976. Acrylic on canvas. (Smithsonian American Art Museum)

It's impossible to think about inclusion without also thinking about exclusion. What explains the things that are missing? The work on view will rotate over the coming years, so perhaps the question will be moot as new work supplants the old. Practical considerations, including the strengths and weaknesses of the museum's collection, explain some omissions — though the weaknesses of a collection also point to the larger values and interests of the institution.

The National Gallery reneges on a fundamental promise to the American people

And, many would argue, you can't escape old narratives if you keep repeating them, hence the erasure of pop art, which is a story oft told by now.

But if one were to be skeptical, and look for more cynical motives, there are some that merit consideration. The erasure of LGBTQ art, the omission of AIDS as a central event in American art and culture of the past half century, the absence of artists such as Jess, Keith Haring, David Wojnarowicz and Peter Hujar (to name but four at random) might be explained by the Smithsonian's dismal legacy of homophobia. The American Art Museum shares the Old Patent Office Building with the National Portrait Gallery, where then-Smithsonian Secretary G. Wayne Clough censored an exhibition of LGBTQ portraiture in 2010. Perhaps the memory lingers, or it has been refreshed by the new fashion for anti-LGBTQ bigotry in national politics. Or perhaps these artists aren't of interest to the museum.

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Perhaps pop art disappeared not because it is overrepresented, but because it dealt directly with issues of consumerism and capitalism. Yes, it was a movement, and we mustn't have any mention of that, but it grappled rigorously with the fundamental cultural and economic impulses that are now killing us and our planet. Is that too dark a message for the Smithsonian?

But these are speculations, and perhaps unwarranted. What matters is how these galleries will evolve, and the larger curatorial choices made in temporary exhibitions. The current iteration of the modern and contemporary galleries is a pleasant space, full of important work by essential artists. By the time the museum undertakes another major reconsideration of these galleries, say in 15 years, the modern art of the 20th century may seem so alien to the contemporary art of today that the two are no longer covered in a single gallery.

That would be an enormously liberating watershed for curators and could help resolve the tension ever-present here, between the canonical — which curators abhor but can never entirely abandon — and the “messy” and “dynamic” art of our own post-canonical moment — where it is easier to do the hard work of being more inclusive.

By [Philip Kennicott](#)

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