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MoMA exhibits millennial project as part of change in curatorial direction

In a heterodox view, the museum leaves behind its linear stylistic categorisations in favour of untidier, more subtle regroupings

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Two years ago, when the Museum of Modern Art announced plans to expand, The Art Newspaper asked director Glenn Lowry what impact the project would have on the presentation of the permanent collection. He said it would be dramatic because the museum regards the expansion as an opportunity “to rethink the institution from top to bottom [with respect to both] its physical structure and intellectual underpinnings” (The Art Newspaper, March 1997, p. 8). There would still be a chronology of key works, he said, “but it will no longer be the chronology, rather a chronology. It will recognise that the history of modern art is much more complex and varied than what we have traditionally presented.”

Now, with the ground-breaking still years away, the museum is offering a preview in a cycle of permanent collection exhibitions entitled “MoMA2000”. The millennial project, which will fill

the museum for the next sixteen months, considers the era in three four-decade spans: “ModernStarts” (1880-1920), “Making choices” (1920-60), and “Open ends” (1960-2000), each subdivided into assorted one- or two-gallery installations.

The series sets aside MoMA’s medium-by-medium chronicle of stylistic evolution in favour of an interdepartmental and thematic approach. According to John Elderfield, co-curator of “ModernStarts”, the idea is to return the works to “a less orderly state.” Art-historical categories like post-Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, De Stijl, and others, give way to alternative classifications such as “the language of the body”; “dancers and bathers”; “the French landscape” and “the urban environment”.

The new focus on content appears to be a renunciation of formalism and the abandonment of an orderly linear diagramme of art history. Founding director Alfred H Barr, Jr must be rolling in his grave! But the museum is aiming to increase our understanding of the period by suggesting that the birth of modernism was far more complex than the story that MoMA has propagated since its founding. “We wanted to offer something questioning and partial instead of something that pretends to be definitive and comprehensive,” says Mr Elderfield. “We wanted to shun anything implying that a consensus exists on what the modern is and is not.”

And how does it work in practice?

“ModernStarts” is a smorgasbord of mini-exhibitions intended to elucidate developments between 1880 and 1920: the transformation of figuration; the shift from representing the country to representing the city, and the idea of the artwork as “object”. Important themes such as the creation of abstract art, the interplay of art and technology, modern approaches to spirituality, and meditations on history go unexamined, or are mixed sotto voce within installations nominally devoted to other subjects.

Rather than attempt to embrace the complex early modern period in one sweep, curators Elderfield, Peter Reed (architecture and design), Mary Chan (drawings), and Maria del Carmen Gonzalez (education), have subdivided it into three sections: “People”, “Places”, and “Things”, each filling a floor of the museum with smaller shows.

“People” (until 1 February) presents 320 works in eight installations. One explores portrayals of performers, another looks at the solitary and often deconstructed figure as a pictorial motif, and others examine figure/ground relationships, and variations on multi-figure compositions by Malevich, Picasso (his “Demoiselles” and “Three musicians”), Leger, Matisse (“The Moroccans”),

and others. By presenting these icons in unfamiliar contexts and juxtapositions, the exhibition helps us to see them anew. A photography show considers subjects posed, candid, and somewhere in between. And here and there are works from later periods, such as the 1993 photograph by Reneke Dijkstra of a Ukrainian boy on a beach which closely echoes Cézanne's Bather and the photo from which the painter worked.

"Places" (until 14 March) consists of mini-shows such as the "French Landscape" (all the usual suspects together with documentary photos of depicted sites), "Landscape as retreat" (woodcuts by Gauguin, Munch, Nolde and others), and "Unreal city" which brings together a panoply of strikingly disparate, yet nearly contemporary works such as Matisse's View of Notre Dame, Delaunay's "Windows", Mondrian's "Composition V", de Chirico's "Gare Montparnasse", and Duchamp's "Network of Stoppages". "Seasons and moments" features epic landscapes including Monet's Water Lilies, Miró's "Birth of the world", Kandinsky's "Four seasons" (shown for the first time in the sort of rotunda the artist had in mind) and Twombly's later take on the theme.

"Things" (until 14 March) includes still-life paintings, collages, constructions, prints, posters, furniture and design objects, and architectural fragments. An area devoted to the guitar assembles images by Gris, Picasso, Braque, Le Corbusier, Laurens, and Torres-Garcia, while another considers horizontal objects (table, floor), including a roomful of chairs by Frank Lloyd Wright, Thonet, Mackintosh, Stickley, Hoffmann, and others.

To give the show an edge, each floor of "ModernStarts" includes a contemporary installation piece. For "People" it is an abstract mural by Sol LeWitt inspired by Muybridge; "Places" has a garden of 6,000 plastic white lilies by Maria Fernanda Cardoso; and Michael Craig-Martin has covered the lobby walls with a huge 442-foot-long drawing featuring dictionary-style illustrations of Rietveldt's blue and red chair, Duchamp's "Bicycle wheel", and other "Things" meant to represent the essential objects of their type.

MoMA no longer has the unchallenged crown among modern art museums. The multinational Guggenheim and the increasingly prominent Tate are coming across as edgier and hipper places, with celebrated new buildings, heavily marketed celebrity exhibitions, and glamorous contemporary art prizes. Whether or not MoMA's new thematic approach to its permanent collection will help the museum reassert its pre-eminence, you can bet it will become a blueprint for rethinking collections around the globe.

Parts of "ModernStarts" are now open; "Making choices" will run from March to September

2000; and “Open ends” will run from September 2000 to February 2001

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