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The Shock of the New, 50 Years On

By ROBERTA SMITH

What did they get and when did they get it? This is a good if possibly superficial yardstick for measuring museums' alertness to new art. After auction prices, it may be the closest the art world gets to baseball stats. If a work of art in a public collection withstands the so-called tests of time, the gap between when it was made and when it was acquired becomes a telling and sometimes thrilling bit of data, like a high batting average. The shorter the interval, the greater the sense of institutional nerve and prescience.

In "The Sweeney Decade: The 1959 Inaugural," at the Guggenheim Museum, the interval is always short. Of the 24 paintings and sculptures on view, all were made in the 1950s and acquired during that decade, usually within a year or two of their creation. Some are still interesting, others not; but they reveal a museum trying to sniff out the new and unafraid to put its money where its curatorial instincts pointed, albeit at 1950s prices.

The exhibition also demonstrates that these instincts are never infallible, a point that is nicely expanded on by a coincidental but oddly complementary show of the same size at the **Michael Rosenfeld Gallery**. Many of its 25 paintings from the 1950s and '60s are by artists who were not on museums' radar at the time.

"The Sweeney Decade" is part of the Guggenheim's celebration of the 50th anniversary of its Frank Lloyd Wright building. It honors James Johnson Sweeney, who was the museum's second director, from 1952 until 1960 (an eight-year decade actually). Sweeney oversaw the construction of the Wright building and broadened the Guggenheim's acquisitions beyond the mostly European, mostly nonobjective art favored by Hilla Rebay, his predecessor.

Sweeney acquired work by European modernists who had fallen outside Rebay's nonobjective parameters - Brancusi being one. He also set his sights on younger postwar artists from Asia and the United States, often buying directly from the studio. And he organized the inaugural exhibition in Wright's new building, which consisted of 133 works, according to its ancient typed checklist.

A hundred and one were by well-known European modernists, with special emphasis on Wassily Kandinsky (23 paintings),



Beauford Delaney (1901-1979), *Composition 16*, 1954-56, oil on canvas, 31 1/2" x 36 7/8", signed

whom Rebay considered the lodestar of nonobjective art. The remaining 32 were Sweeney acquisitions; 15 of them are in the current show.

It's too bad there wasn't room for more, but "The Sweeney Decade" still constitutes a fascinating time capsule in its combined distillation of a curator's taste, a museum's optimism and a historical moment. It is also a snapshot of the way postwar artists strove to be innovative, or at least up to date, in their emphasis on the materials and processes of painting.

I can't say the canon is overturned: the strongest works here are by two of its stalwarts. One is Jackson Pollock's 1953 "Ocean Greyness," whose nodes of color embedded in thrashing strokes of black and gray create a field of oculuslike openings that presage Lee Bontecou's canvas reliefs. The other is Willem de Kooning's "Composition," from 1955, an equally dense expanse of clashing brushstrokes, with red dominant. In contrast, many noncanonical painters look as misguided as they ever have, among them Hans Hartung, Jean-Pierre Riopelle and Antonio Saura.

But some unfamiliar artworks command attention. With its garish color and emphatic brushwork, Karel Appel's totemic 1953 "Two Heads" (acquired in 1954) points to the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat and may also have been grist for Picasso's relentless mill. Takeo Yamaguchi's boldly scaled 1958 "Work — Yellow" is dominated by a lopsided double square of deep yellow. Applied with palette knife in a thick, smooth slab - a method that Brice Marden would soon adopt - it occupies a subtly rhythmic field of thinner brown brushwork, evoking both the calligraphy and the sword hilts of Japan.

The British sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi's "St. Sebastian, No. 2," from 1958, teeters between postwar existentialism and Pop appropriation, and between traditional bronze and assemblage. It seems nearly every part of the figure is cast from a different made or found element. It becomes dizzying to try to figure out which is which and how it was all put together.

In her selections for this show Tracey Bashkoff, the Guggenheim's associate curator for collections and exhibitions, has stressed the international sweep of Sweeney's vision and the unfamiliar parts of the collection. That may explain why Franz Kline and Stuart Davis are not here, although both were represented in the inaugural show with canvases that outclass quite a bit that is. But I was happy to become acquainted with the paintings of Luis Feito and Alfred Manessier and the sculptures of Eduardo Chillida, David Hayes and Etienne Hajdu.

In the corner of one gallery the desire to get beyond painting's conventional gestures and materials is evident in the efforts of Antoni Tapes (lots of sand), Alberto Burri (burnt wood) and Conrad Marca-Relli (canvas shapes on canvas). They call attention to like-minded artists whose work Sweeney did not acquire: Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein, Ms. Bontecou and John Chamberlain, as well as Jasper Johns.

At the Rosenfeld gallery "**Abstract Expressionism: Further Evidence (Part 1: Painting)**" includes a slightly different cast of characters. Although there are two artists from the Guggenheim show (James Brooks and Marca-Relli), and a few others who were highly visible players in the '50s (Hans Hofmann, Joan Mitchell and Milton Resnick), many of the artists here were not being snapped up by museums. Painters like Norman Lewis, Jay DeFeo, Charles Seliger, Charles Alston and Alma Thomas report from an Abstract Expressionist road less traveled.

It is instructive to cherry-pick from this ensemble, with an eye to what might both shake up and enhance the Sweeney show. My choices from the pre-1960 works include the 1951 Brooks painting (it's better than the Guggenheim's 1958 canvas); Alfred Leslie's monstrous "Hoboken Collage" (1953-54); Mr. Resnick's somber but beautifully painted "A," from 1957; and two Alfonso Ossorio paintings, but especially the oozing relieflike "Mirror Point" (1958), which describes a tree trunk with thin sheets of knotty wood stuck in the thick paint.

But the work that should go to the Guggenheim or some other public collection before all others is Beauford Delaney's "Composition 16," from 1954-56, a shimmering field of dark, green-tinged yellow laid over a field of finely minced primaries and finished with a series of flat ribbonlike brushstrokes - also yellow - whose meandering lines seem vaguely floral.

Reflecting Delaney's admiration for Monet and possibly an awareness of Pollock, this marvelous painting is a must-have for any museum that wants to expand its definition of Abstract Expressionism beyond the white men who still dominate it.

"The Sweeney Decade: Acquisitions of the 1959 Inaugural" continues through Sept. 2 at the Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street; 212) 423-3500. "Abstract Expressionism: Further Evidence (Part 1: Painting)" continues through July 31 at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 24 West 57th Street, Manhattan; (212) 247-0082.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/10/arts/design/10sweeney.html>



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Alfonso Ossorio (1916-1990), *Mirror Point*, 1959, oil and impasto with objects on Masonite, 95 3/4" x 23 3/4" x 2 1/2", signed