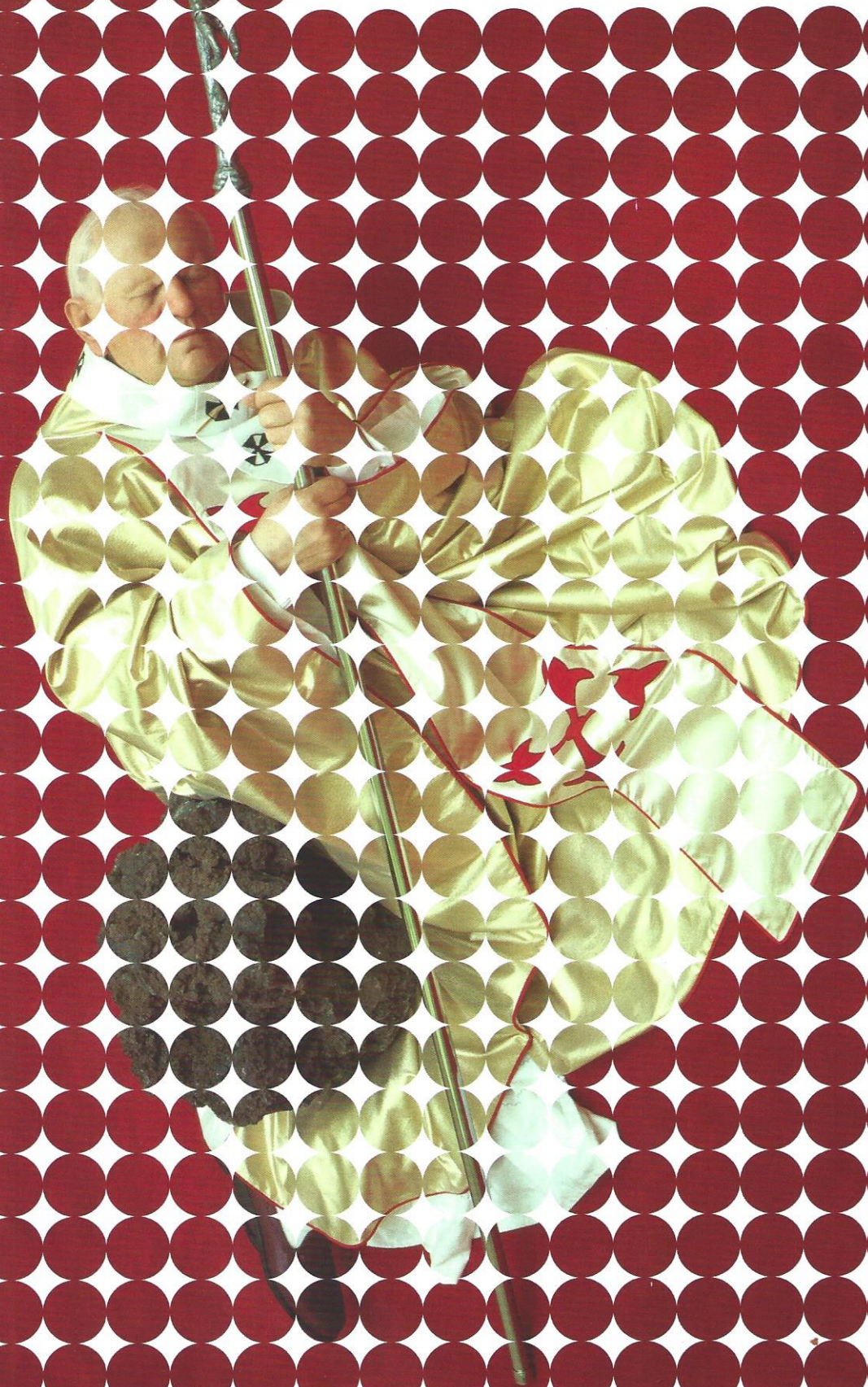


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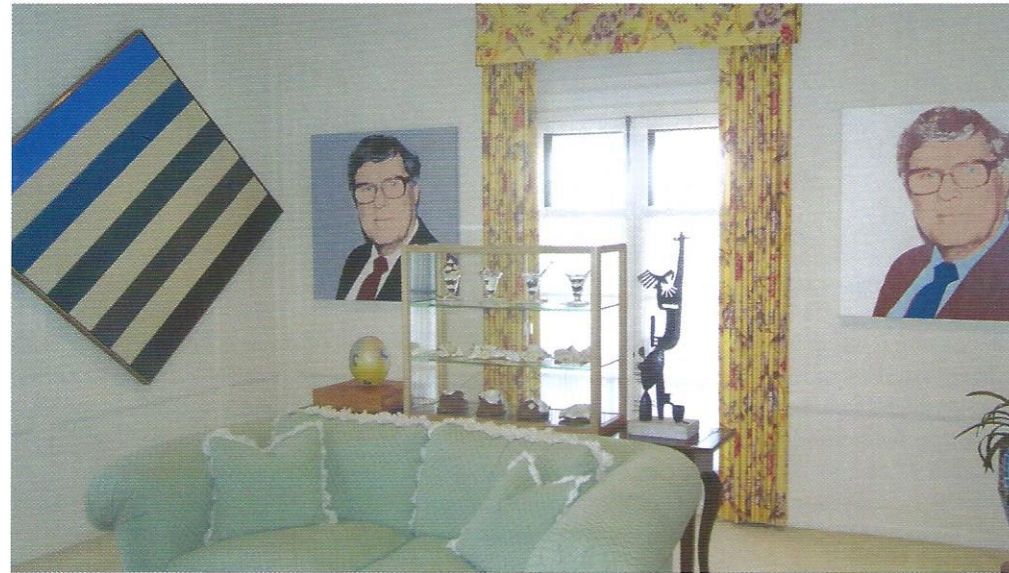




The Collection as Artistic Medium:

Billie Milam Weisman and the Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation Collection

BY DREW HAMMOND



This page left: The upstairs sitting room. From left to right, works by Kenneth Noland, Andy Warhol (*Portrait of Frederick R. Weisman*), Ken Price, Claes Oldenburg and Julio González. Courtesy of the Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation. This page right: *Visual Pleasure* - Billie Milam Weisman and Robert Motherwell's *Summer Seaside Doorway* of 1971. Opposite page: *The Annex*, designed by Franklin D. Israel, opened in 1992.

The late William Stanley Wyatt, an artist and educator who had an immense series of collections of objects as improbable as egg beaters and glass insulators, used to say that “the moment you have more than two of anything, it’s a collection.” For him, part of the point of collecting was to savor what he regarded as its intrinsic absurdity, and the irony of the likelihood that after years of obsessive attention, upon his death, his collections would be scattered to the wind.

But even Wyatt admitted that a collection of important art works is an altogether different thing. To collect means to *gather together*, and the moment one gathers objects together, invariably there occur new meanings that the objects acquire in relation to each other, as constituents of an ensemble or as an aspiration to a totality. This is especially true of art works, which, by definition, derive meaning from the way they reveal tensions, formal or conceptual. In a collection, inevitably there arise occasions to compound these tensions not only by virtue of the interplay between the works and their setting, but from the juxtapositions of works with each other.

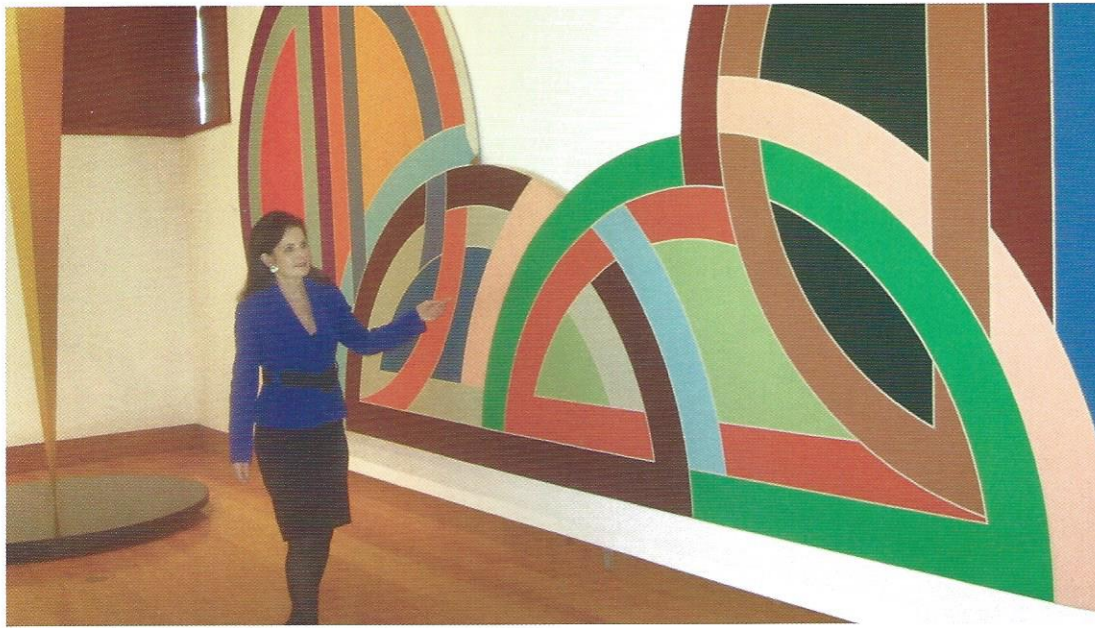
This way of deploying a collection so as to evoke in the spectator the maximum aesthetic experience through relations between constituent works has distinguished the foundation, and is a skill that

Billie Milam Weisman of the Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation (Los Angeles) attributes to having learned from Fred.

Frederick R. Weisman, who passed away in 1994 and was a natural businessman who, from a relatively young age, made a fortune with a series of successful ventures, began collecting in the 1950s while still married to his first wife. They started collecting for themselves, and later for their son, and eventually for Fred’s company. When the marriage ended in the 1970s, they divided the collection. Both continued to collect art, and gifted many works to both the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), and the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), which helped substantiate Los Angeles’ museum holdings of modern and contemporary art.

But despite reductions in holdings from the collection’s first period, if anything, Weisman’s acquisitions continued to increase in number and in boldness. During the 1980s he met Billie Milam, who accompanied him on his acquisition “capers” during a boom period in the Western art world that catapulted many artists to world prominence.

Arguably, Milam’s whole life had prepared her for this task. At least two family members had been artists, her elder sister had studied art, and soon Billie chose art history as her specialty in



A gesture to the repudiation of gesture: Billie Milam Weisman in the Foundation Annex with a Frank Stella from *The Protractor Series*. In the background, a sculpture by Lita Albuquerque.

college and in graduate school after an initial interest in math and science. Perhaps it was this latter tendency that made it natural for her to specialize in the most technical and scientific branch of art studies: restoration and conservation. In this field, she did an internship at Harvard and joined the staff of LACMA, at first, in the conservation department. Soon she had become well-known on the west coast, and had already worked with the collections of Eli Broad, Nathan Smooke, Ray Stark, Frances Brody and the Hearst Castle before consulting for the Weisman collection.

Most of the works currently on view at the foundation, 80% of the collection, were acquired in the eighties and early nineties during the period of Billie's association with Frederick R. Weisman, including the time of their marriage. As Billie Milam Weisman, she also worked with Franklin D. Israel on the design of the Foundation Annex, which opened in 1992 and offered an additional structure specifically planned for the presentation of art, with thirty-foot ceilings, an open floor plan for flexible display options, and variable natural light.

Now, the collection comprises over 1500 works with over 400 currently on show. Among collections of Modern and Contemporary art, it has a range and quality that surpasses that of many important museums. A partial list of artists includes Modernist titans, Picasso, Brancusi, Miró, Magritte, Klee, Kandinsky, Giacometti, Ernst, Léger and de Chirico, Abstract Expressionists such as de Kooning, Pollock, Rothko, Motherwell, Kline, Morris Louis, Frankenthaler and Rauschenberg (also called a "Neo-Dadaist" and a Pop artist, besides other names by unfriendly critics and bartenders), undisputed Pop artists Warhol, Lichtenstein, Rosenquist and Wesselmann, Minimalists Donald Judd and Frank Stella (at least early on), and not to mention a host of artists less vulnerable to categorization such as Bacon, Hockney, Noguchi, Ellsworth Kelly, Jasper Johns, Yves Klein, Barnett Newman and Larry Rivers, California artists such as Sam Francis, Ed Moses, Mary Corse, Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, John Baldessari and Ed Ruscha, not to mention dozens of others. The collection even includes young and emerging

artists whose works continue to nourish the collection from a scrupulous, ongoing schedule of studio visits by Billie Milam Weisman.

PRINCIPLES OF ACQUISITION DERIVED FROM
FREDERICK R. WEISMAN'S ORIGINAL THREE BASIC RULES OF THUMB:

I. GO WITH YOUR GUT.

The initial, visceral impact of a work was a first criterion for acquisition. The idea was that acquisition should have nothing to do with artistic fashion or art world trends, but with an authentic response to the work itself. Once such a response was undeniable, the collector should have no fear or hesitation in the acquisition. This presupposes that the acquisition of young artists' work was equally valid under these conditions.

II. LIVE WITH IT.

Adequate understanding of a work and successful trial and error variations of display options came from the privilege of prolonged daily exposure to the work.

III. GIVE BACK.

The Weismans always had in mind that the appropriate purpose of acquisitions ultimately was to create a collection that would transcend the sum of its parts, and remain intact for the public in its original setting and in traveling exhibitions and loans that would preserve relations between constituent pieces.

But for a collector of genuine substance, someone who wishes the collection properly to exalt art rather than to exalt the person who manages to own it—for such a person, acquisition is only the beginning of the enterprise. Not necessarily is it the most intellectually demanding phase.

The problem of display, like many philosophical problems, appears simple at first glance, but devilishly complicated the more one ponders it. In general, display strategies have fallen into two common categories. Of these, the first and most traditional display

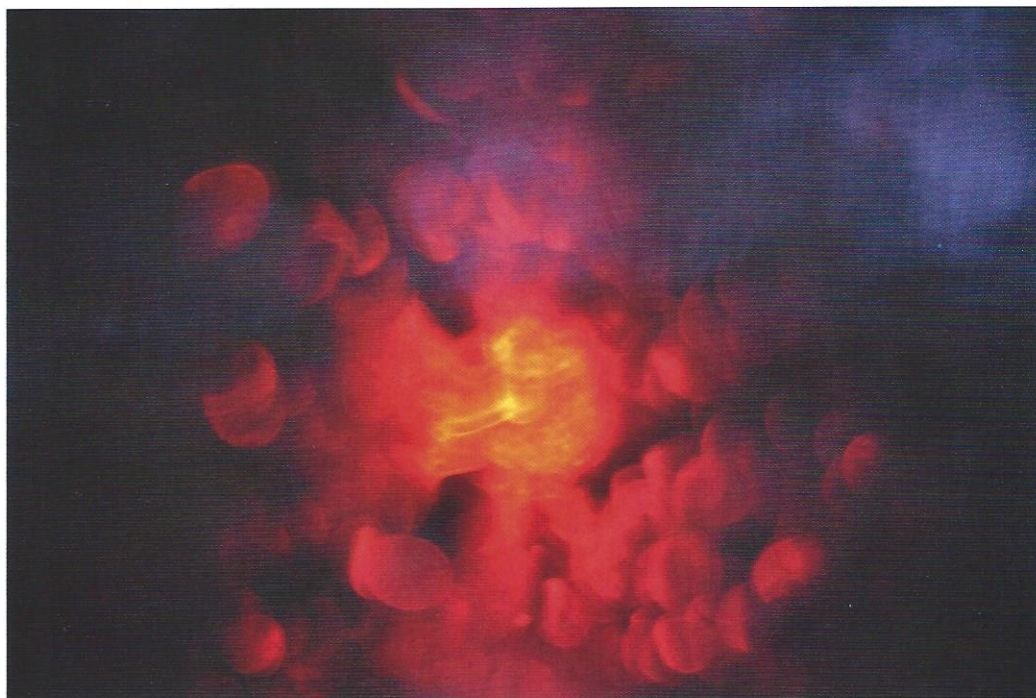
strategy—not counting the sort that involves the heads of the former owners of the artworks mounted on spears—is historical and chronological. The fact that this strategy is, at heart, didactic, seems to lend it an implicit legitimacy reserved for all educational endeavors. Originally, this educational justification offered an implicit rationalization for confiscation by the state of art collections from former monarchs. Or it could help to compel a selective forgetfulness of another kind of history of the indiscretions of those who, during the accumulation of a fortune that enabled such prodigious acquisitions, were less charitable than

their opening of collections to the public gaze would later suggest.

In most cases, the historico-chronological displays blithely evade the issue that both periodization and the emphasis on certain geographical points of origin for art works implies the imposition of a point of view about aesthetics, and often about political values. Such an imposition has presented the illusion of being only fitting and proper in the art world, despite that in many other fields, it would demand further justification. In general, for example, an enormous Western art establishment of museum staff, curators, collectors, scholars, journalists, and even college freshmen have taken for granted the idea that the Modernism of the School of Paris has been an achievement superior to Expressionism. In whose judgment? By whose criteria? And what really are the implications of such an assumption? Is the assumption valid, or is it just that the center of gravity of Expressionism was the German-speaking world instead of the Left Bank?

What of Expressionism the Nazis could not crush—not for lack of trying—the victors who saved the world from the Nazis did relegate to an indisputable second place for over half a century. This fact is not only evident in the scholarship, which often treats this preference as a self-evident truth rather than bother to justify it, but it is also in the display strategies. And if this has been the fate of Expressionism, imagine the fate of artistic genius that flourished in countries even farther from the home of *L'Origine du Monde*. Besides being narrowly Euro-centric as a rule, this display strategy, paradoxically, was inadequate to capture for the spectator, the way art constantly quotes its own historical precedents, whether in homage, repetition, or as a reaction against earlier ideas.

Sometimes, museums are acutely aware of the rather embarrassing implications of their own history. They become so desperate to appear progressive, open and immune from chauvinist fuddudduddism, that any requirement of intellectual substance becomes a de facto assertion of the evil cultural hegemony of the past. Nowhere



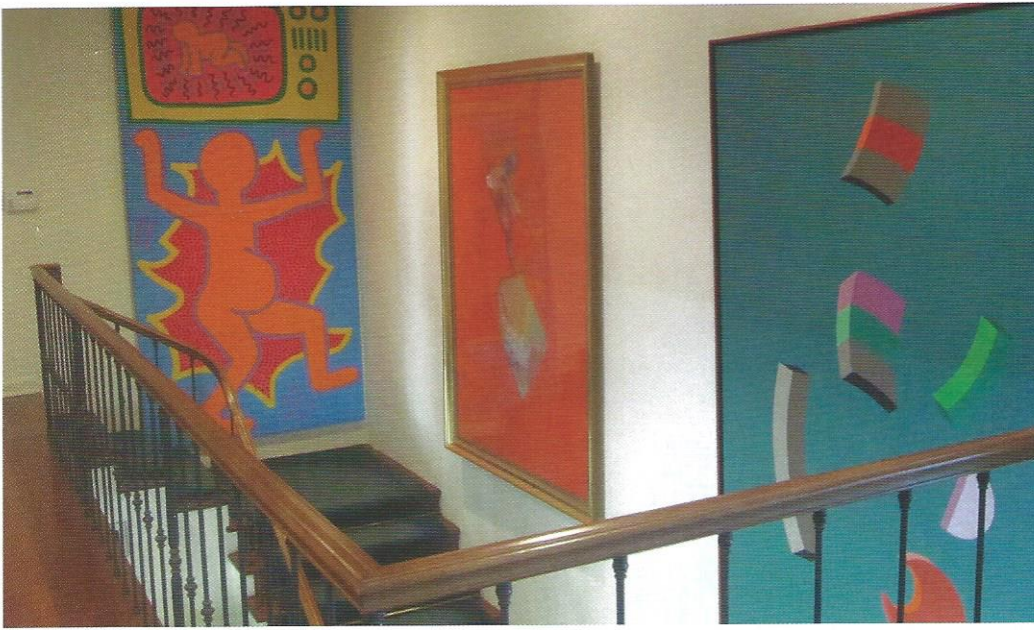
Jia, *The Road Series No.5*, 2011, Fine Art Inkjet on Hahnemühle Fine Art Baryta, 59 x 89 in. (150 x 225.8 cm)
Courtesy of The Frederick R. Weisman Foundation.

is this reverse-patronizing attitude more institutionalized than in London, with its lasting shadow of an inferiority complex during the rise of the New York School, coupled with an overripe residue of Imperialist guilt. How else can one explain the rise of a tedious decorator like Chris Ofili? And who would dare cry foul when the Tate purchased his paintings while he was a board member of the same institution?

Sometimes with the British, what is chosen for display is simply a matter of the path of least resistance. In the decision to allocate the prestigious site of the Tate Modern Turbine Hall to a recent temporary installation by Ai Weiwei, certainly a competent artist on a good day—although you would never know it from the kitsch spider web he installed at Tate Liverpool, or from the gray Turbine Hall installation itself, which has the visual impact of a gravel driveway—the question remains: did the Tate decide on Ai over a giant like Wang Jianwei as a matter of aesthetic choice, or was it largely because Ai speaks English and therefore anyone could call him without having a translator present?

There is a good reason for distinguishing the Tate Modern when it comes to strategies of display, since, more than any other contemporary institution, the Tate Modern has revealed itself as the foremost champion of an influential alternative to the old fashioned historico-chronological model. From its beginning in 2000, the Tate Modern most forcefully institutionalized the *thematic* display strategy—at least until its “rehang” of 2006. The curators displayed art works without regard for their chronology, but instead organized them around four themes, *History/Memory/Society*, *Nude/Action/Body*, *Landscape/Matter/Environment* and *Still Life/Object/Real Life*. This strategy was sufficiently novel that, combined with the general curiosity, the museum succeeded in doubling its attendance projections to reach five million per year.

But it would be wonderful if we really could, unlike many museum administrative personnel, consider attendance figures as



Left:
Stairway to Heaven: from left to right, works by Keith Haring, Francis Bacon and Ronald Davis. Courtesy of the Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation.
Lower Left:
The Wild One: Keith Haring may have painted the bikes, but Ed Ruscha painted the jet.

something separate from whether a display has any authentic rigor or justification that transcends its mere presence. More cynical observers called the Tate thematic strategy a fig leaf to cover enormous gaps in the collection that would have made any display with a pretense of historical continuity seem ridiculous. Even the Tate has moved away from its original thematic designations, perhaps because everyone began to realize that the themes were arbitrary and restrictive. Instead, the museum has adopted a reformed display strategy of *Pivotal Moments of Twentieth Century Art*. Rather than attempt to group works in the service of a theme, *Pivotal Moments* purports to identify a theme in the service of the art works.

The Weisman Collection, a hidden gem that probably receives fewer visitors in a year than the Tate Modern attracts on a good weekend—despite that art works in the Weisman Collection patiently are no less important—has elaborated a third display strategy that I choose to call *the aesthetic strategy*, consistently with the Greek derivation of “aesthetic” from *aisthetikos* (*feeling*). Like the thematic organization, it is not strictly chronological. But neither is it strictly thematic in the sense of the Tate Modern’s first themes such as *History/Memory/Society*, an example of a “theme” so general

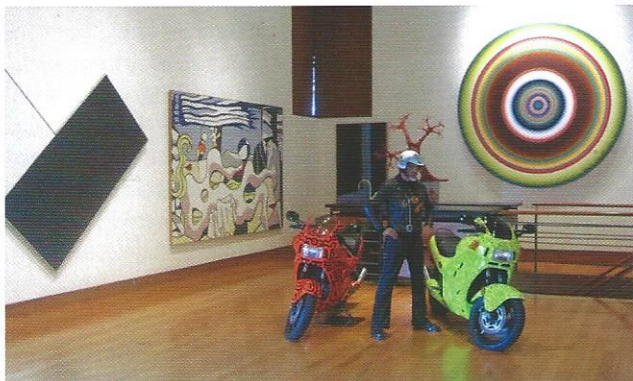
that, taken in a broad sense, could probably apply to almost any array of art objects. Nor is it thematic in the sense of the Tate’s later *Pivotal Moments* such as *Energy and Process*, a category that implausibly aspires to unite *Arte Povera* with Malevich and Jenny Holzer.

The Weisman arrangement is *aesthetic* because the criteria for arranging works have most to do with specific formal and conceptual relations between the works themselves. Not only do these relations successfully reveal and generate aesthetic tensions between works, they also illuminate by comparison individual works’ less overt features that, but for the manner of their arrangement, might otherwise escape us.

Although this feature is evident throughout the collection, the group of paintings on the stairway wall of the main house offers as good an example as any. Here one finds paintings of similar dimensions by artists of three generations and three art cities quite distinct from each other: in ascending order, the L.A. artist, Ronald Davis (b. 1937), Francis Bacon (1909-1992, London) and Keith Haring (1958-1990, New York).

Leaving aside the theoretically incidental datum of the sort we don’t resist, that a Bacon often fetches 1000-2000 times the price of a Ronald Davis at auction, and perhaps 1000 times as much as an unusual Haring of this sort, the fact remains that one hardly could choose three artists more removed from each other in outward aspect, geography and sensibility. And yet the placement is not only deliberate in the positive sense, but in the negative sense as well, since it was not only a matter of the choice to place them together, but it was equally a choice not to place the Bacon with another Bacon in the collection, the Davis with another Davis, etc. in the manner of an historical display.

At first glance, the only overt relation between the images derives from the banal observation that, to varying degrees, they have in common a shade of orange. But this obvious feature becomes merely a hint that invites the spectator to consider deeper relations between the images that are not nearly as obvious. Of these, the most outstanding is the matter of perspective (or the projection system) that each image employs. Since the forties, it was standard for Bacon to





You don't always get it at first glance: from left to right, Alan Siegel, Robert Motherwell, Max Ernst, Josef Albers, Duane Hanson, Alberto Giacometti, Hans Hoffmann and Hanson. The Hansons are polyvinyl sculptures of the parents of the collection's founder, Frederick R. Weisman.

create for his figures a different kind of perspective field than that of the environment in which the figure occurs, so most Bacon images evoke a tension between two projection systems in the same canvas. *Study for the Eumenides* (1981-82), the Bacon on the Weisman stairway wall, takes this practice even further by integrating at least three perspective fields—perhaps an allusion to the fact that *The Eumenides* is also a classical play—and a stage evokes an additional fictional perspective within the literal perspective of reality.

The Haring is even more atypical for the artist in its treatment of perspective, since standard Haring images eschew perspective altogether in favor of flatness derived from graffiti and, most often, they even imply a spatial “transparency” due to a rejection of any differentiation between the space enclosed by a figure’s outline and the background. Not so for this painting, which not only asserts perspective depth with a filled-in figure bursting from a clearly delineated background space, but, like the Bacon, also evokes three spaces: foreground, background and the fictional space occupied by the radiant baby in the upper part of the image.

Scrupulously rigorous perspective illusion—perhaps inspired by a reading of the *Ambiguities of the Third Dimension* section of Gombrich’s seminal *Art and Illusion* of 1960—were practically a *raison d’être* of much of Ronald Davis’ work, and the painting flanking the Bacon on the Weisman stairway is no exception. The fact that the fictitious objects he creates occur on an undifferentiated field of color, at the outset makes them impossible to orient in any literal sense of depth or scale. The artist compounds the effect by rendering each object with curves that lend further perspectival ambiguity. Finally, he devises for each of these simple shapes, a distinct incremental change in the manner of their projections only visible as an effect *ex post facto* once the eye finishes its trajectory from one extreme of an object to the other.

In this sense, the manner of the images’ placement reveals that the three stairway paintings have a profound relation of creative perspective treatment that defies their overt dissimilarity. But in order to appreciate an illuminating comparative display strategy (of which the above is but one example), it is worthwhile to recall that, for

the most part it occurs in a space originally designed as a private residence. Under these circumstances, the collector must effect such an arrangement with all the limitations of the setting, limitations of space, color and light issues, and others. The placement must also accommodate simple formal conventions whose violation would draw attention, such as contrast, spatial balance, overall color composition and the alternation of negative and positive volumes. In other words, all the same formal principles of arranging the internal constituent elements of composition in a painting also apply to the general distribution of art works in a shared space.

What is more, the display strategy, like its thematic and chronological alternatives, must also properly take into account the spectator’s progress through the collection in both its spatial and temporal aspects, with pauses, changes in rhythm and tempo, and even the unexpected revelation. In this sense, most analogies to musical structure are appropriate.

Taken together, these features begin to convey a sense of the achievement of the aesthetic display structure of the Weisman Foundation collection. Under the direction of Billie Milam Weisman, the foundation carries on this strategy and its tactical application, the idea that a collection itself can be an artistic medium. “On a subconscious level, the audience gets it,” she says unequivocally, “If you hit them with an installation that is too academic, it can detract. It becomes a much less creative discussion about the pieces.” □

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