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ART REVIEW

Ambushed by Sundry Treasures

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The Museum of Modern Art’s Artist’s Choice exhibitions rarely disappoint. There have been nine such shows since the series was initiated in 1989, each with its own flashes of imagination, excavations of neglected artworks and subversions of the curatorial status quo.

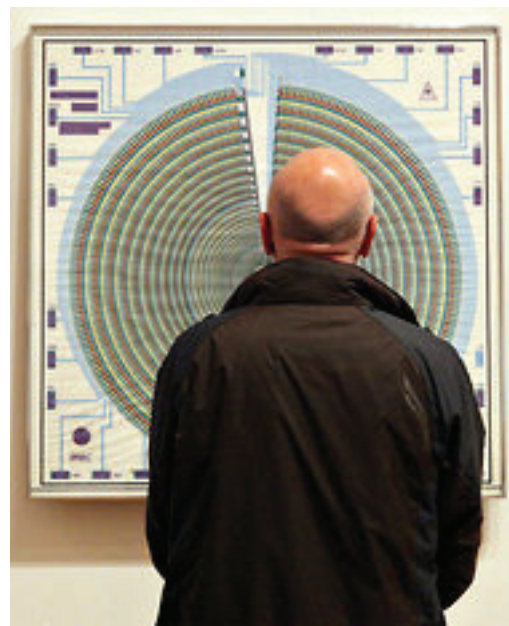
Past perpetrators have included Scott Burton, the first to be invited, who ruffled feathers by separating several of the museum’s Brancusi sculptures from their bases and presenting all elements as independent artworks. In 1995 Elizabeth Murray mustered an impressive exhibition of art exclusively by women. And in 2008 Vik Muniz created what he called a rebus with a linear sequence of carefully linked works that included morsels like Josiah Wedgwood’s 1768 black basalt coffee cup, one of the most elegant drinking vessels of all time.

Now the torch has been passed to Trisha Donnelly, an admired Conceptual and performance artist known for her poetic if sometimes hermetic ways with mediums like drawing, photography, video, film and sound art. Working with Laura Hoptman, a curator, and Cara Manes, a collection specialist in the museum’s department of painting and sculpture, Ms. Donnelly has done the Artist’s Choice tradition proud.

For one thing, she has pushed even harder than most of her predecessors at the boundaries among the museum’s medium-based departments. In addition, for the first time, the Artist’s Choice show has been inserted into what may be the Modern’s very heart: its vaunted painting and sculpture collection galleries. Also for the first time, it consists of three galleries that are not contiguous; they are to be found in the far-flung corners of the fourth and fifth floors, which house the painting and sculpture collection.

The clusters of work that Ms. Donnelly has chosen ambush us, quietly but incisively disrupting the still largely chronological, mostly canonical, movement-by-movement account of modernism put forth in these galleries. Greatly favoring drawings, prints, photographs and several forms of design over traditional painting and sculpture, her arrangements draw you in, charm and mesmerize, while raising questions about what is art, who is an artist and what constitutes greatness or genius.

The first display — in Gallery 4 on the fifth floor — is a solo show devoted to a photographer, and not one of the medium’s anointed gods like Eugène Atget or Walker Evans. Its subject is Eliot Porter (1901-90), brother of the painter Fairfield Porter, who devoted much of his career to figuring out how to take extraordinarily beautiful and precise photographs of birds in the wild. His images often appeared in *National Geographic* and tended, as the wall text says, “to be relegated to the genre of nature photography.”



The exhibition includes a 1989 computer-generated diagram.

The 28 photographs here form a calm, concentrated oasis centering on a single vision, in notable contrast to the displays of larger works by various artists in the adjacent galleries. The images are spellbinding: small, exquisite and mostly in color of an unusually subtle kind, due to the complex dye transfer process Porter used. They have an amazing clarity of detail.

The birds, their markings, their nests, the plants in which they build them, their frazzled, frantically hungry offspring, all seem vividly present. Ideas about the genius of nature (even more than of art), the alien strangeness of birds, the familiar rituals and bonds of parenthood ricochet through the gallery. Its surprisingly intense mood is summed up by Porter's assertion in a wall label: "Before all else, a work of art is the creation of love. Love for the subject first and the medium second."

The second gallery of Ms. Donnelly's show (Gallery 11, fifth floor) is a kind of delirious, cross-generational, multimedia meditation on artistic vision and striving, with nary a canonical artist or masterpiece in sight. Drawings and prints and photographs ring the walls, hung cheek by jowl. Punctuated by occasional paintings and sculptures, the totality of 55 works by 40 artists ranges over more than 100 years. Landscapes, portraits, the figure and the face mingle with abstract works.

Eccentrics, lesser knowns and unknowns prevail here, along with unfamiliar works by better-known artists. Odilon Redon is represented by two early landscape paintings on paper that surprise by conjuring Balthus and the young Dalí. Berenice Abbott (1898-1991), known for her sympathetic portraits, is represented by six little-known abstract "Wave Pattern" photograms (1958-61), made using water, glass and lights.

In a text panel Ms. Donnelly states that she considers each selection "an epic entity," an outsize phrase that seems to emphasize that any successful artwork, no matter how slight or seemingly delicate, requires relentless personal conviction. Gossamer textures are the norm and once more invite close looking, whether in James McNeill Whistler's misty 1878 lithograph of the Thames or Jacques Villon's 1920 etching of the stark terra-cotta portrait head of Baudelaire by his brother Raymond Duchamp-Villon (1876-1918), an image whose fine parallel lines almost seem computer generated. The same might also be said of "Pomegranate," a tightly wound jewel-like painting from 1957-59 by Pamela Bianco (1906-1994), a British-born American artist who is one of the show's finds.

"Dunes" (1935), by Augustus Vincent Tack (1870-1949) — an idiosyncratic portrait painter who also produced nature-based abstraction — has a visionary vibe, as does "No!," a large 1981 painting of a staring head by Gino De Dominicis. "Shoes, Shoes, Shoes," a 1966 sculpture by Joe Goode consisting of a segment of funkily carpeted wood staircase, all but invites ascension to "The First Step," a starry abstraction from 1910-13 by Frantizek Kupka.

The other three-dimensional objects here include sculptures by Isamu Noguchi and Edward Higgins and a swank convertible couch from 1971 by Alessandro Becchi that, exhibited unfolded, resembles a life raft. Michael Lax's 1980 air ionizer, a tiny black plastic pyramid, also from the design collection, sits on a pedestal, but is plugged in. Put your hand near it and you will feel it altering the atmosphere, as all art should.

In the final portion (Gallery 22, fourth floor) Ms. Donnelly largely forsakes traditional art for design, with the exception of a few photographs; Giorgio de Chirico's 1921 drawing of Euripides with extravagantly crossed, unseeing eyes; and "The Fourth Dimension," a small planet-studded painting about death as liberation by Patrick J. Sullivan (1894-1967), a folk artist, that was last exhibited at the museum in 1943. This display also includes a small, elegantly misshaped bowl by the great American potter George Ohr, a pear-wood side table by the French Art Nouveau designer Hector Guimard, a pair of amazingly au courant Polaroid sunglasses from 1946 and a streamlined wheelchair from 1986 by the Swiss designer Rainer Küschall. These finally made it clear that, consistent with Ms. Donnelly's interest in performance, all the objects in her show evoke the human body or are used by it.

But the dominant works here are 11 large, colorful, intricately patterned prints that bring to mind checked or plaid textiles, abstract paintings and, in one circular instance, the Maya calendar. Most are computer-generated diagrams of integrated circuitry from the mid-1980s designed by Xerox, Texas Instruments, the Intel Corporation and Sam Lucente, who later became vice president for design at Hewlett-Packard.

Also included is the oldest item in the Modern's collection, a small circular Coptic tapestry from the seventh or eighth century, embroidered with a cartoonish, eerily modern face. On view for the first time, it serves as an ancient ancestor to the printed diagrams.

Someone told me that at the news conference for the show Ms. Donnelly said that one reason she chose the tapestry was the name of the donor: Lillie P. Bliss, one of the museum's founders. Emphasis on Bliss, a good word for this eccentric, joyful, finely wrought excursion.

“Artist’s Choice: Trisha Donnelly” remains through April 8 at the Museum of Modern Art, (212) 708-9400, moma.org.