

## New SFMoMA Aims to Be Not Just Giant, but Global

By JORI FINKEL APRIL 29, 2016



SAN FRANCISCO — Inside the newly expanded [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#), one of the most startling sights is the absence of works on the towering walls flanking the main zigzagging staircase.

The blank walls are awaiting the arrival of a pair of paintings next year by Julie Mehretu, the Ethiopian-born, New York-based artist. “She’s working on the commission,” said Gary Garrels, a senior curator, climbing stairs with the ease of someone who has given many museum tours. “The paintings are so large that she has to use an old church in Harlem as her studio.”

When the museum officially reopens on May 14, after a three-year closing, \$305 million addition by the architecture firm Snohetta and a campaign that elicited some 3,000 works of art from donors, it will have bragging rights on many fronts.

Spanning a full city block at its widest, with a dynamic [white structure that resembles a cruise ship](#), the museum will be the largest in the Bay Area. It will have more exhibition space dedicated to photography than the Getty in Los Angeles, and more gallery space than the current Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan.

It will also have extraordinary concentrations of 20th-century art: Calder mobiles, Warhol silk-screens, Richter paintings and LeWitt wall drawings across three floors, thanks to a 100-year loan by the Gap founders Don and Doris Fisher that necessitated the expansion.

But curators at the museum, who don’t want it to be seen as the Fisher Museum of Modern Art, are already working hard behind the scenes to bring the museum into the 21st century, with major commissions like Ms. Mehretu’s, as well as lesser-known discoveries. They are seeking to bring a visual and cultural diversity to the museum that the Fisher collection, rooted in blue-chip work of the white male art world of 1960s America and Germany, is lacking.

“S.F. MoMA has always had a commitment to the emerging, the experimental and the new, but that has waxed and waned over the decades,” Mr. Garrels said. “It’s more important than ever that we strongly commit to being engaged with contemporary art in its global dynamics.”

“Global contemporary” is a buzz phrase heard in museum board rooms throughout the country. “It will be interesting to see: What’s going to set them apart from every other museum in every other city that has contemporary ambitions?” said Ian Berry, who runs the Tang museum in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., and was an early visitor to the Snohetta building. (He called it “a great achievement.”)

Among the contemporary initiatives underway are film programs, community-driven projects and residencies for performance artists. The museum’s director, Neal Benezra, plans to hire a curator this fall to focus solely on contemporary art “across all collecting categories,” shaking up departments long organized by medium: photography, media arts, architecture and design, and — Mr. Garrels’s area — painting and sculpture.

Mr. Benezra has earmarked one large lobby for new art, once the Fishers’ [214-ton Richard Serra sculpture](#) is removed in a couple of years. “It will be like our version of Turbine Hall,” he said, referring to the Tate Modern’s vast and enormously flexible space.

Elsewhere in the building, signs of the museum’s commitment to the hyper-contemporary and geopolitically diverse are already visible. A project room on the fourth floor has a new Bauhaus-inspired installation by the Berlin-based Portuguese artist Leonor Antunes, while the seventh floor (the top floor for visitors) has a survey of recent donations: major pieces by Ai Weiwei, Mark Bradford and Mark Grotjahn, as well as some less predictable choices.

One surprise is [Brad Kahlhamer’s](#) 2014 hanging wire sculpture “Super Catcher,” which looks like dream catchers caught in an archaic fisherman’s net, studded with small bells. “The rattling makes me think of native dance rituals,” said Mr. Garrels, who placed the work in a new gallery exploring “issues of cultural identity.”

Another standout is a vibrantly patterned and painted collage, by the Nigerian-born Njideka Akunyili Crosby, that depicts her own cross-cultural wedding. She kneels in traditional African dress and offers her American husband, who wears jeans, the ritualistic palm wine. “We bought it straight from her show at the [Studio Museum](#), before she even had a gallery,” Mr. Garrels said.

Katie Paige, a trustee at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (and whose father, Charles Schwab, is board chairman), has started a contemporary-art support group to organize studio visits with artists, trips to biennials and fairs. It's meant for new collectors, including the Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and investors whom everyone in cultural philanthropy seems to be chasing, with little success.

The guests at the first event, a March conversation between Mr. Garrels and the artist Carol Bove at Ms. Paige's home, included the Instagram co-founder Mike Krieger; his wife, Kaitlyn Trigger; and the venture capitalist Anthony Schiller, who works with the longtime museum patron Dick Kramlich.

"Maybe we can't compete with L.A. or New York in terms of the depth of

museums or galleries or community of artists," Ms. Paige said. "But we certainly compete very strongly on the collectors' end. And this group is a way for the museum to reach a new generation, a younger donor base."

A long-running group affiliated with the museum supports Bay Area emerging artists; this newer one has a more global focus, in line with the curators' expanding interests.

"I think their big challenge," said Mr. Berry, the Tang Museum director, "is to be attentive to their local audience and community of artists while simultaneously finding the time and resources and energy to get out and see as much as they can in the larger world of art making."

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