

KCRW Art Talk: Art reviews, news and announcements from Edward Goldman.

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The Latest in Museum Misbehavior



Jackson Pollock's No. 1, 1949
Enamel on canvas

You won't believe your eyes when you see what the Getty's done this time. In the Impressionist gallery, probably the most popular with museum visitors, someone had the audacity to place an abstract painting, a visual bombshell from the mid-20th Century. When I saw it last Saturday I joined the small crowd of people staring at this unlikely intruder, hanging amongst the beloved masterpieces of 19th Century French art. This modern invader almost steals the show from such heavyweights as Monet, Renoir, Cezanne and even Van Gogh, whose "Iris" remain the most famous and expensive artwork that the Getty has ever acquired.

In an unprecedented break from tradition, Scott Schaefer, the chief curator of paintings at the Getty, joined forces with Paul Schimmel, the chief curator of MOCA, in an attempt to stir things up, to surprise visitors, but probably most of all to surprise themselves. Each curator had the unusual invitation to select one great work of art from the other museum's collection. So, the Getty curator went to MOCA and asked to borrow the great 1949 painting by Jackson Pollock, known as "No. 1". To my surprise, the museum generously allowed him to do it, in spite of the fact that this is one of the most valuable artworks in MOCA's collection. And so this large and imposing canvas traveled across town and when it arrived at the Getty it was awarded, as it should be, a place of honor. But can you imagine a Pollock hanging on brown walls? I thought I knew this wonderful painting very well, but I was absolutely floored by the new energy this abstract, quintessentially modern painting radiates amidst the gallery chock full of priceless masterpieces. But what's more, these masterpieces never looked so good. And this is another big surprise the curator pulled out of his hat.



Edward Munch's Starry Night
Oil on canvas, 1893

Meanwhile at MOCA, in a recently reinstalled gallery full of large, impossibly beautiful and moody paintings by Mark Rothko, there is a shy and mysterious newcomer, an 1893 canvas by Norwegian artist Edvard Munch, titled "Starry Night" not to be confused with the Van Gogh painting of the same name. This is one of my favorite paintings from the Getty Collection, so to see it against the stark, white wall in a contemporary museum was another welcomed shock which allowed me to see this old acquaintance of mine in a new and wonderfully revealing way. The Munch here looks almost modern, while the Rothkos, by association acquired even more class.



John Valadez's *Crustacea Oceana*
Installation, 2005



Ed Moses' *Bound and Gagged*
Installation, 2005

And while we are talking about the deliciously creative misbehavior by art museums, what about the [Natural History Museum](#) joining the fray? This almost 100 year-old, and, as such, the oldest museum in Los Angeles, is reaching out to a new audience with a groundbreaking exhibition

from it's mind-boggling collection of 33 million items. Six well-known L.A. artists were invited to make six separate installations by selecting items from the amazing range of objects in the museum's storage. After browsing through the thousands of specimens of seemingly every creature ever to swim or stomp our planet, and then going through thousands of such artifacts as carved totems from Africa or New Guinea, the artists made their surprising choices and as a result reintroduced us to the richness of the Natural History Museum's holdings. For many, this exhibition, appropriately titled "Conversations" will be an eye-opening experience. It certainly was for me. And for that, I am thankful. One only hopes that the Museum of Natural History will continue to push the envelope.