

## Review/Art

## New Curator at Modern Challenges Convention

By MICHAEL BRENSON

One of the most revealing details of the new installation of post-World War II painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art is the placement of Judy Pfaff's "Blue Vase With Nasturtiums" near the escalator on the third floor. This 1987 painting-sculpture is very much a Pfaff work: exuberant, even antic, multicolored, turning the history of art on its ear in an upbeat, good-natured way.

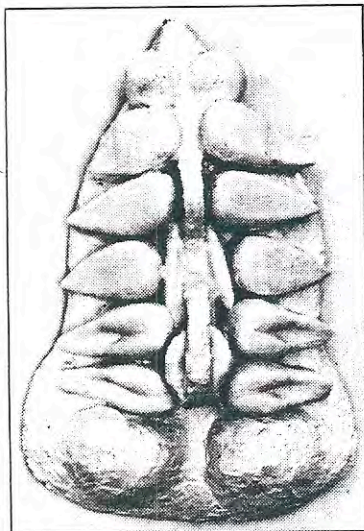
It has been given the place that was previously occupied by a painting-sculpture by Frank Stella that was similar to the Pfaff in its operatic exuberance and in the way it seemed to burst from the wall. Mr. Stella is one of the Museum of Modern Art's heroes. Substituting the Pfaff for the Stella is a direct challenge to the museum's view of art history. It asks the public to concentrate a little bit less on the stars of that history and a little bit more on the ideas, styles and sensibilities that are shared by numerous artists at any given moment.

The substitution was made by Robert Storr, who joined the Modern in September as its only curator whose sole responsibility is contemporary art. Although his installation was conceived too soon after his appointment to include any acquisitions he initiated, it is a clear statement. It provides a good deal of information about who he is and it suggests why he has the chance to pump fresh blood into a museum whose approach to contemporary art remains wary and constricted.

The 40-year-old Mr. Storr is one of the most versatile figures in the art world. He has been an abstract painter for 20 years and said in a recent telephone interview that his painting "is the thing that matters most to me." He has taught in nearly a dozen art schools and for one year he was the associate dean of the New York Studio School of Painting and Sculpture. His curatorial efforts include a collaboration on last summer's Susan Rothenberg exhibition in Malmö, Sweden.

Mr. Storr is best known as a critic. It is clear from his publications that he is curious, restless and prepared to take seriously almost any approach to art.

He has written a short book on Philip Guston and is completing a long study of Louise Bourgeois. He has contributed to catalogues for exhibitions on Dorothea Rockburne, Martin Puryear, Ellsworth Kelly and Jean Michel Basquiat. As a contributing editor for *Art in America*, he has written articles on film makers, realists and abstract painters, ranging from Yvonne Rainer and Lucian Freud to Robert Ryman.



Museum of Modern Art

"Torso: Self-Portrait," by Louise Bourgeois, at the Museum of Modern Art.

turmoil that is never far from the surface of American life.

Despite these emotional jolts, however, there are no messy works in this installation, no works in which imagery, feeling and gesture are not clearly controlled by structure. This installation tends more toward abstract than figurative work, more toward concrete objects and situations than any yearning for transcendence, and more toward restraint than excess.

Mr. Storr is very attuned to American art's constant dialogue between power and vulnerability, between insisting on intellectual control and insisting that control is always an illusion. One of the pivots of the installation brings together first-rate works by Ms. Rockburne, Ms. Bourgeois and Eva Hesse, each of which is geometrically rigorous yet emotionally disarming.

The other pivot also groups artists who are not normally linked. It juxtaposes Robert Irwin's untitled light piece, which sprouts from the wall like an airy giant mushroom; Richard Tuttle's quirky and irregular wire line drawing on the wall, and Jack Whitten's painting "Kappa I," in which the black-and-white veil-grid of 60's Minimalism suddenly begins to open up, throb and dance. This grouping suggests the interest in line and light that many artists around this time, including Ms. Rockburne, shared.

Mr. Storr's installation of 43 works from the 1950's to 1990, all from the Modern's permanent collection, suggests a deep respect for the landmarks of postwar art, but also a strong skepticism about the idea of an artistic mainstream. The installation keeps the visitor a bit off balance. "If you like this work," it says in every room, "then you should also consider its relationship to that one."

Even with the occasional jumpiness of this installation, there can be no doubt here either about Mr. Storr's love of painting, or about his feeling for the personality and integrity of the art object.

There can also be no doubt about his resistance to stereotypes and his support of art by women. "The argument that women's art is not shown because of a lack of quality is nonsense," he said.

Mr. Storr's first big show at the Modern, "Dislocations," is scheduled for next fall. The list of very different artists invited to conceive installations includes Ms. Bourgeois, David Hammons, Ilya Kabakov, Bruce Nauman and Adrian Piper. "All the artists are working on the edge of something," Mr. Storr said. "All of them make work that calls assumptions of one kind of another into question."

There are two clear esthetic preferences in the current installation, which moves chronologically through several galleries and also lines the third-floor corridor. Mr. Storr is drawn to spare, stripped-down abstract painting in which feeling is tightly controlled and the incident is minimal. The most impressive gallery brings together a diverse group of abstract paintings from the 60's that reflect the unending reformist need in America to make art that will purify or correct previous art. In most of the paintings in this gallery, by art stars like Yves Klein, Al Held, Tony Smith, Agnes Martin and Mr. Ryman, and by the admired but lesser known Jo Baer, there is an attempt to use such issues of painting as edge and surface to create an experience of pictorial (as opposed to natural or otherworldly) space and mind.

At the same time, Mr. Storr is drawn to a kind of taut, high-pitched expressiveness that intends to leave the viewer's feelings exposed. The disruptive paintings of Neil Jenney and Ida Applebroog and the wood sculptures of Jacqueline Winsor and Alice Aycock all lead the viewer into that pit of emotional and cultural

The installation consistently challenges any notion of a single art-historical canon. One gallery includes such classics of the 1950's and early 60's as Jasper Johns's "Flag," Robert Rauschenberg's "Bed," Andy Warhol's "Gold Marilyn Monroe" and Frank Stella's "Marriage of Reason and Squalor II." But the room also includes Mr. Kelly's black-and-white painting "Running White" — which makes line itself emblematic — and "Here-Then-There!," by the esoteric abstract painter Alfred Jensen. All the painting in this room is insistently flat and obsessed with the authority and texture of the surface. With Mr. Jensen, the installation provides an easier transition to the grids of Minimalism and suggests that at no point in American art did the interest in metaphysical concerns die.

The gallery that the public is likely to find the most surprising is the largest one, near the end. Of the 11 paintings and sculptures, six are by women. One of the others is a psychologically needling floor piece of afghans and dolls crocheted and sewn by Mike Kelley that raises questions about the formation of sexual and racial stereotypes.

The range of painting is substantial, from the two-panel gestural abstraction of Joan Mitchell, to Susan Rothenberg's two-panel painting, in which parts of a horse and indeed the parts of the painting no longer fit together, to Elizabeth Murray's gregarious yet private 19-part painting in which the sense of the totality of an image and the totality of feeling seems shattered. Mr. Storr leaves no doubt that the contribution by women to painting during the past 20 years is at least equal to the contribution made by men.

This is the installation of someone with ideas. This is also the installation of someone who understands that political arguments in museums can only be effective if they are esthetically convincing. A curator with a curious, far-ranging mind whose art politics is continually being challenged and shaped by esthetic experience is necessary and rare.

The current installation of post-World War II art remains on the third floor of the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53d Street, through March 20.