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ART REVIEW

At the Met Museum, an Abstract Show That Falls Short of Epic

An exhibition meant to show off the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection of art from the 1940s to the present day only points to gaps and a lack of imagination.



A detail of Jackson Pollock's "Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)" (1950), which is among nearly 60 works in the newly opened Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition "Epic Abstraction: Pollock to Herrera." Credit: CreditThe Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

By Roberta Smith

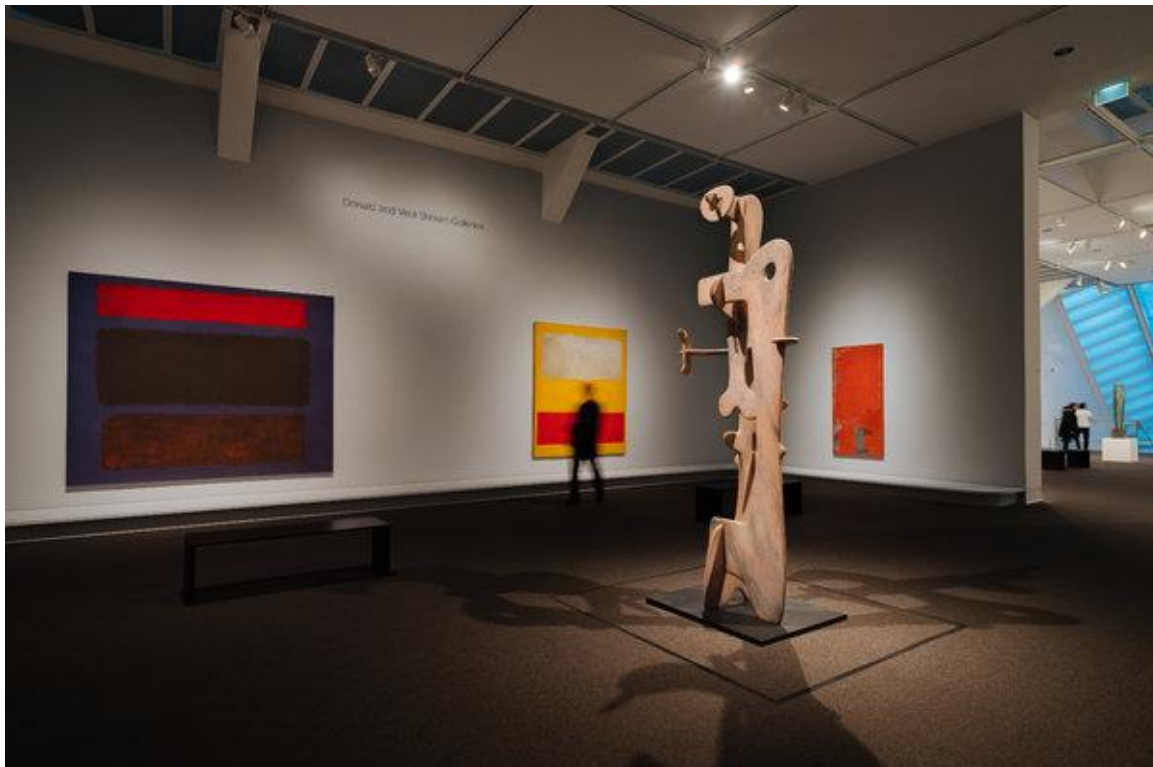
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When it comes to postwar art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art rarely lets you breathe easy for long. Just when it hits a good phase, it suddenly changes course and more than likely shoots itself in the foot. Things were really looking up at the Met Breuer, with its

superbly installed recent exhibition of [Jack Whitten's sculpture](#). Then the Met suddenly pulled out of the last three years of its eight-year [lease there](#). It cut short a project that was producing results, giving the Met's 20th-century curators sustained access to larger and better-designed galleries.

And there's more to worry about than just exhibitions, as has been made clear with the dismaying "[Epic Abstraction: Pollock to Herrera](#)," a long-term display of nearly 60 works drawn mostly from the Met's permanent collection. This show creates the impression that despite the Met's expertise in every other area of art, it frequently seems clueless and guided more by fashion than imagination when it comes to its collecting of postwar art.

As a title, "Epic Abstraction" is overblown, especially once you see the show, which contains plenty that is modest. The phrase "Epic Abstraction" seems to be an attempt to rename the heroics that began with Abstract Expressionism, and now are supposedly continuing in an art world with a widening canon — one much more diverse and inclusive of women and artists of color.



Isamu Noguchi's "Kouros," a marble sculpture from 1945, in a room full of Mark Rothko's works, including from left, "No. 16" (1960); "No. 13 (White, Red on Yellow)," from 1958; and "No. 21" (1949). Credit Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Charlie Rubin for The New York Times



Carmen Herrera's "Equilibrio" (2012), her single work in the show. Credit Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

As for the "Pollock to Herrera" part of the title, there are four canvases and five commanding drawings by Pollock here, but poor Carmen Herrera is expected to hold up her end of things with just one geometric abstraction — a recent work that is a promised gift to the Met and her first to enter its collection.

The show is intermittently chronological, moving generally from Abstract Expressionism to Minimalism, then Color Field painting. It begins canonically, in great-man mode, with eight of the nine Pollocks in the first gallery followed by 10 paintings on canvas or paper by Mark Rothko, which look less dazzling than they should. The Pollocks are disrupted by an extraordinary untitled 1958 painting by Kazuo Shiraga of the Japanese Gutai group. Shiraga made paintings like this mostly by dragging his feet through mounds of oil paint in response to Pollock's work. Here his effort makes the scale of Pollock's great "Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)" of 1950 suddenly look almost delicate. It is a telling comparison.



A detail of Kazuo Shiraga's untitled 1958 painting, a response to Pollock's work. Credit Charlie Rubin for The New York Times



Pollock's "Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)" (1950) in the exhibition's first gallery. Credit The Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

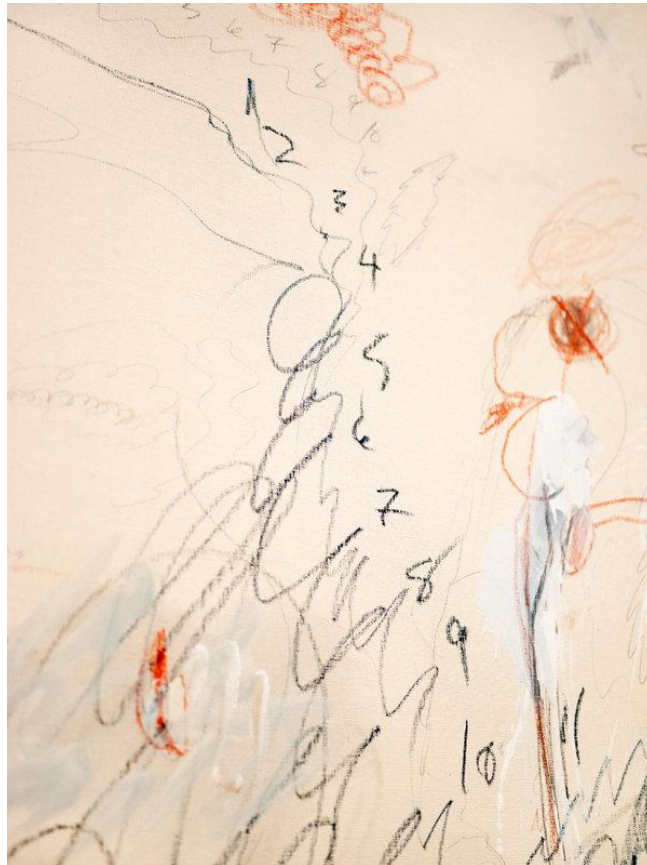
Rothko's thunder is stolen by Isamu Noguchi's striking 1945 sculpture "Kouros," whose biomorphic pieces of pink and gray marble have a smooth fleshiness and a generally

figurative configuration. Standing at the center of the gallery, the piece is fully visible on all sides, in quantities of space. It looks stunning.

From here things devolve into a kind of free-for-all. The idea that art needs space is lost to overcrowding, and everyone else is represented by a single work. (Except Clyfford Still, who has two — including the compact black-on-black-on-black “1950-E,” which hasn’t been on view in five years.) The largest gallery is overshadowed by Louise Nevelson’s overweening black sculpture “Mrs. N’s Palace,” whose footprint rivals that of the Temple of Dendur’s (and look at all the space that gets). It ends with works by Thornton Dial, Frank Bowling and Yayoi Kusama, and the dueling craziness of Elizabeth Murray’s imploding “Terrifying Terrain” (1989-90) and Jean Tinguely’s outstanding “Narva” (1961), a seeming explosion of wire and machine parts. It’s an outstanding example of his work.



A detail of Jean Tinguely's 1961 sculpture "Narva," made of wire and machine parts. Credit Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris; Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

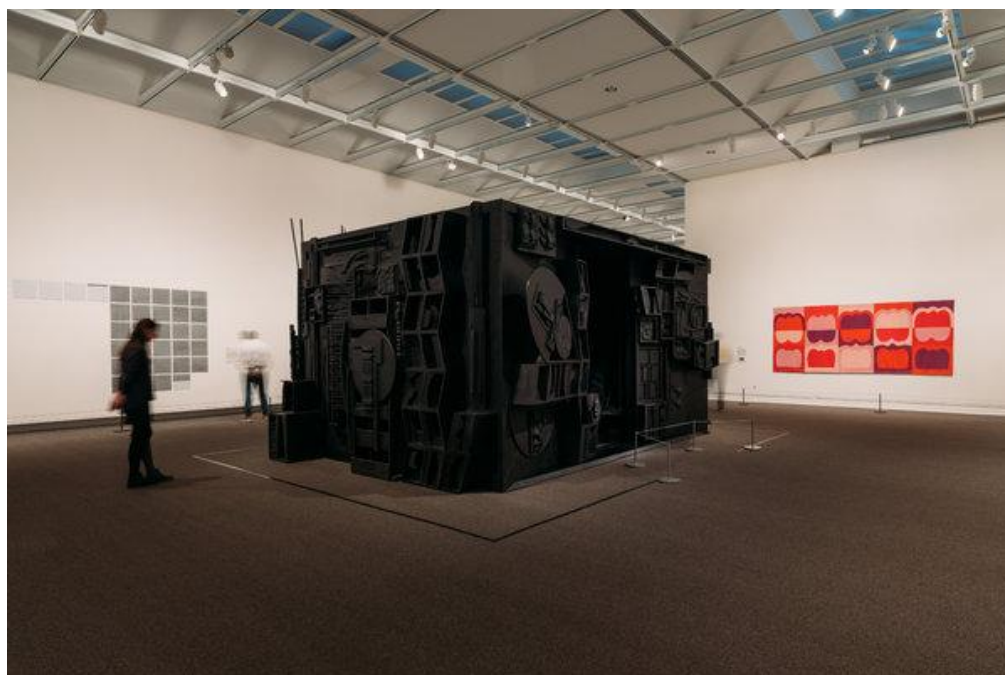


A detail of "Dutch Interior," Cy Twombly's mostly handwritten painting from 1962. Credit Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

Several of the stronger works are extended loans. If you find yourself giddily thinking "Wow! The Met owns *this?*" the answer may be no, it doesn't. Not "Dutch Interior," Cy Twombly's big beautiful mostly handwritten painting from 1962; not Helen Frankenthaler's bold "Western Dream" (1957); and not the big rutted Shiraga. You wouldn't feel shortchanged if the Met had more paintings of this caliber, but it doesn't. Thankfully, at least one of the standouts is a promised gift, headed for the collection: Joan Snyder's 1971 "Smashed Strokes Hope," a mural-like canvas whose big strokes of color float separately in space, like words. It takes no flak from Joan Mitchell's immense "La Vie en Rose" of 1979 (acquired in 1991), in which harsh black strokes crash against softer sprays of pink, white and lavender.



Joan Snyder's mural-like canvas "Smashed Strokes Hope," from 1971. Credit Charlie Rubin for The New York Times



Ilona Keseru's colorful "Wall-Hanging With Tombstone Forms (Tapestry)," from 1969, shares a space with Louise Nevelson's "Mrs. N's Palace" (1964-77), center, and Jennifer Bartlett's "Squaring: 2; 4; 16; 256; 65,536" (1973-74). Credit Estate of Louise Nevelson/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

Other new acquisitions disappoint, including paintings by Bridget Riley and Hedda Sterne and a sculpture by Barbara Hepworth; none of these works shows the artists at

their best. Stronger recent arrivals are Judit Reigl's foreboding "Guano (Menhir)" of 1959-64; Ilona Keseru's pink, red and purple wall hanging, inspired by tombstones but resembling open mouths, from 1969; and a handsome shaped abstract painting by Robert Mangold.

Among the great old standbys is Alma Thomas's "Red Roses Sonata," of 1972, owned by the Met since 1976, its red mosaic pattern lighted from within by shifting shades of celadon. It would be wonderful to see it near Barnett Newman's regal "Concord," of 1949, instead of the more Minimalist "Shimmer Bright" (1968), which is displayed here.

Several of the new acquisitions are by women or artists of color; the exhibition makes a mild attempt to shift the canon away from white men and toward everyone else. But it has no historical rhyme or reason. It skips around arbitrarily and leaves out a lot. Mark Bradford is a talented painter whose career has blown up. I don't know that I'd call him "pre-eminent" except in prices, but his work is actually quite conventional. Including his 2016 "Duck Walk" signals little more than a desire for hipness; putting it next to a big Clyfford Still is not going to reshape any canon. But it does rather brutally ignore the history of African-American abstraction. The Met has a 1970 painting by Sam Gilliam, "Whirlirama," that would have been much more appropriate here. It also owns a canvas by Stanley Whitney.



From left: "Duck Walk" (2016) by Mark Bradford; "Raw Attraction," a 2001 sculpture by Chakaia Booker; and Clyfford Still's 1960 painting "Untitled." CreditCity and County of Denver, via Clyfford Still Museum/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

For something more recent, there are David Hammons's insurrectional shrouded "Tarp" paintings. He's pre-eminent, and they're epic. Could the Met's trustees have said yes to one of those?

History has it that they (the trustees) weren't too keen on Jackson Pollock's "Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)" when Robert Beverly Hale, then the head of its newly created contemporary American art department, presented it in 1957 — the year after he convinced them to buy Willem de Kooning's "Easter Sunday" (which is here, opposite the Twombly) and four years after he brought them the marvelous Noguchi sculpture.

It might seem that blame should go to the show's organizer, Randall Griffey, a curator in the department of modern and contemporary art, but that's too simple. For one thing, Mr. Griffey's specialty is American art before 1950. His ground-floor arrangement of earlier modernist works from the collection — including European art and design objects — is solid and lively, as was his installation of the outsider artwork from the show introducing the Souls Grown Deep Foundation gift last spring.

But the problem signaled here is larger than one curator. It represents a lack of vision that has, on and off for decades, plagued the Met's collecting of recent art. Fixing it will take money, courage and commitment from several levels of the institution's hierarchy. It's horrible to see the Met look this hapless.

Roberta Smith, the co-chief art critic, regularly reviews museum exhibitions, art fairs and gallery shows in New York, North America and abroad. Her special areas of interest include ceramics textiles, folk and outsider art, design and video art.

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