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NY CULTURE

MoMA Takes a Fresh Look at New Art

In the Reinstalled Contemporary Galleries, Works Have Gotten More Recent—And More Global

"Gamepieces" by Mumbai-based artist Nalini Malani, one of the contemporary works on view in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibit "Scenes for a New Heritage" *PHOTO: KEITH BEDFORD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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The Museum of Modern Art is taking a fresh look at some of the newest works in its collection.

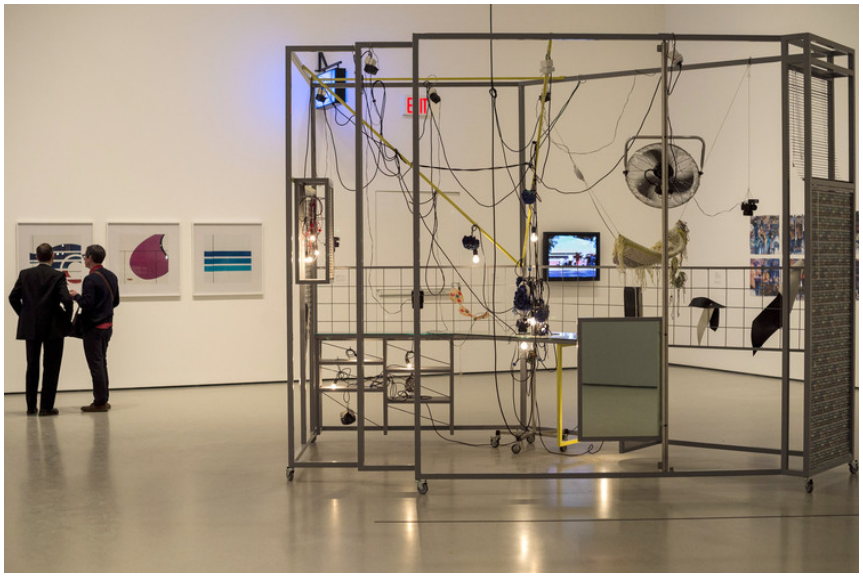
"Scenes for a New Heritage," which opened last week in the museum's second-floor contemporary galleries—and remains on view for a year—showcases nearly 40 pieces made between the mid-1980s and last year, drawn from all over the globe.

"This installation draws heavily on acquisitions that reflect how much broader our collecting interests have become," said MoMA Director Glenn Lowry. "We've tried to match our interest in being engaged internationally with our interest in collecting the

most recent art being made."

Artists included in the installation represent 19 nationalities, the museum says. More than half the works are showing at MoMA for the first time, and just under half were acquired by the museum in the past five years.

Choosing who makes the cut isn't always easy. As an institution that has long played a vital role not only in documenting, but shaping, the history of modern art, MoMA has a high bar for assessing which artists and works will ultimately endure beyond the noise and trends of the moment. And with art prices soaring—in November, Christie's sold $853 million of modern and contemporary art in one two-hour span—museums are often at the mercy of their deep-pocketed supporters to donate or purchase costly newer works that curators covet.



South Korean artist Haegue Yang titled this 2009 work "Salim," Korean for "household" or "managing a household."
PHOTO: KEITH BEDFORD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The selection process for "Scenes"—focused primarily on photographs, videos, installations, sculpture, drawings and prints—changed the museum's starting date for "contemporary" by more than a decade, from the 1970s to about 1989. That year, said Quentin Bajac, the exhibit's coordinating curator, was when the Berlin Wall fell and the modern global-positioning-system was established. Both precipitated a slew of geopolitical changes.

The exhibit focuses on ways that such change—political, social and otherwise—has affected both the art world and the wider world. Featured artists take on subjects including the production and consumption of digital imagery; reverence and irreverence for tradition; and the effects of globalization.

“We

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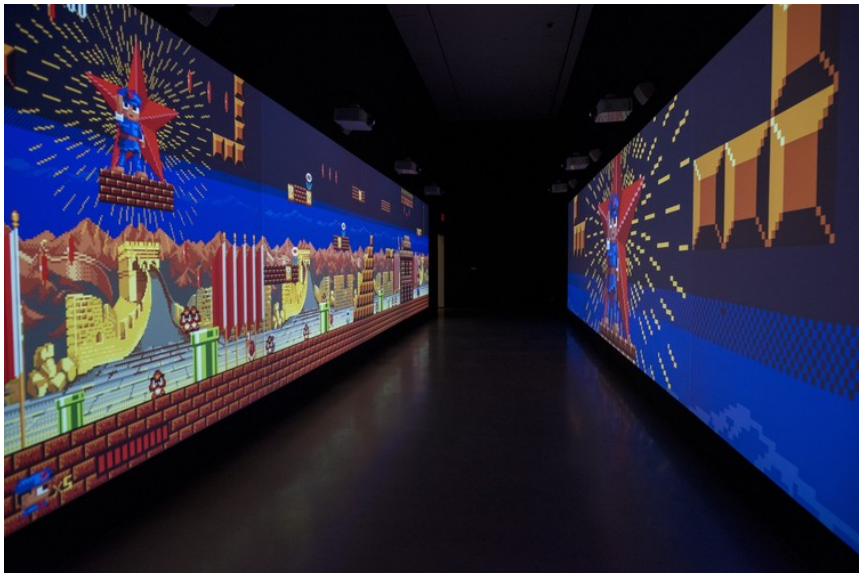
wanted to highlight the fact that today we’re talking about a multicultural world,” said Mr. Bajac, MoMA’s chief curator of photography, who oversaw the selection process along with curators from the departments of media and performance art as well as drawings and prints.

Visitors entering the galleries are greeted by a large collage from 2014 by Rirkrit Tiravanija, who attached newspaper pages about Thailand’s ailing king to a canvas and painted them over with a message echoing the French political theorist Guy Debord: “The days of this society is numbered.”

“It mistranslates it, in bad international English that I and a lot of people are practicing,” said Mr. Bajac, his French accent rising with a laugh.



The large-scale interactive video installation "Long March: Restart," by Chinese artist Feng Mengbo, merges elements of classic games like “Street Fighter II” with visuals from Communist China. *PHOTO: KEITH BEDFORD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Nearby, a room-size videogame is projected on two long screens, the work of Chinese artist Feng Mengbo. The 2008 piece immerses viewers in Chinese history by

programming elements of “Super Mario Bros.” and “Street Fighter II” to interact with digital imagery of Chinese propaganda and communist art. Using a wireless controller in the gallery, visitors assume the view of a Red Army soldier.

Some pieces call for more traditional types of observation, including a wall-size work by American Kara Walker that uses the historical medium of cut-paper silhouettes to address America’s history of slavery and ethnic stereotyping. Other works include a photo installation about maritime labor by American Allan Sekula and “Grosse Fatigue,” a popular video about the history of the cosmos that won French-born artist Camille Henrot the “most promising young artist” award at the 2013 Venice Biennale, a prestigious, curated showcase of contemporary art.

Indian artist Nalini Malani, whose work explores the collision of opposites—past and present, science and spirituality—is represented by a kinetic installation, called “Gamepieces,” with spinning cylinders that project old-fashioned shadow figures over abstract video footage on the wall. An installation by Chilean-born artist Alfredo Jaar combines writings on the disappearance of images with an empty room flushed with blinding white light.

Mr. Jaar said he welcomes the internationalism of the show’s roster. When he moved to New York in 1982, “the art world was shockingly provincial,” he said. “Clearly, the [broader] world did not exist, and MoMA, as well as all other institutions in New York, had this same limited outlook.”

In "Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrows," Chinese artist Cai Guo Qiang uses a fishing boat excavated from his hometown, pierced with thousands of arrows, to address cultural and political concerns. *PHOTO: KEITH BEDFORD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

But that has changed over time, Mr. Jaar said. “It is a new MoMA, curious and generous.”

“Scenes for a New Heritage” is running at the museum concurrently with several other contemporary shows—“The Forever Now,” a survey of recent painting; “Cut to Swipe,” on media and performance art; and the pop-music show “Björk.”

Mr. Lowry, MoMA’s director, sees the refreshed contemporary galleries as a reflection of the museum’s broader engagement with art of our time, a process that accelerated 15 years ago, when the museum merged with PS1, a Queens-based contemporary-art center.

The goal, Mr. Lowry said, was “to emphasize our commitment to the present—which is why we were founded in the first place.”

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