

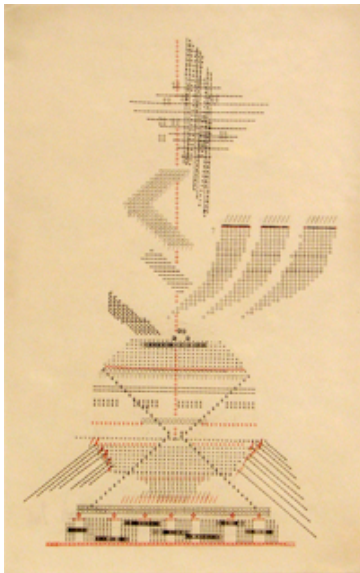
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Sweating the big stuff

Art and issues at play in MOCAD's latest show



John Miller's "Come Home This World," 1999.



Gurt and Uwe Tobias' untitled typewriter drawing, 2006.

insight into the evolution of Aaron's eye.

The overabundant installation brought out the formalist in me. I latched onto large abstractions, such as "Alphrik," a 1964 painting of four four-pointed stars in earth tones by Paul Feeley, an East Coast artist from the 1950s and 1960s whose work is undergoing a revival, and "Julianne," a lyrical field of undulating cool grays by Jerald leans from 2001. I also dug the untitled image pecked away on a typewriter from 2006 by two Transylvanian brothers, Gurt and Uwe Tobias, that looks like it could have been done by a Russian Constructivist stuck in a day job at the Comintern.

Personal musings aside, aesthetics is first and foremost about separating things from one another, whether it's good from bad, this style from that, or whatever. MOCAD's showcase of Aaron's collection makes a claim for its importance. But you can't claim the authority to make aesthetic judgments without setting aside your personal interests. It's here that *Stuff* may run into serious trouble.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so they say. How one gets from subjective taste ("I like that painting") to objective aesthetic judgment ("This is a significant work of art") has been debated for generations. The new show at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, *Stuff: International Contemporary Art from the Collection of Burt Aaron*, raises questions in that regard but it often comes up short on satisfactory answers.

Stuff consists of contemporary art from the personal collection of MOCAD trustee Burt Aaron, who lives in Ann Arbor. The show contains 140 pieces by 75 artists working in the United States, Europe and South America. The earliest is a Robert Smithson drawing from 1961 (see sidebar); however, more than 90 percent of the work has been done within the last 10 years. The exhibition choices were made by Aaron along with John Corbin, an artist and educator who's on MOCAD's program committee. There are big names here and there — Smithson, Tim Rollins and KOS (Kids of Survival), Sean Landers, Adrian Piper and Dawoud Bey, for example. Many of them are considered up and coming on the contemporary scene, and they're certainly the main reason to see this show.

Stuff is the third exhibition by the fledgling MOCAD, and the first that's totally homegrown. It reflects an institution still groping to find its way. The show sprawls over the museum's three exhibition halls, augmented by temporary walls that demonstrate the versatility of architect Andrew Zago's floor plan. Where the inaugural exhibition, *Meditations on an Emergency*, seemed lacking, with its sparse installation of works around MOCAD's cavernous space, and the second, *Shrinking Cities*, conceptually overburdened, making it hard to see even the trees, let alone the forest, here it's as if the thought was to strike a middle ground by offering plenty of art and setting it free to speak for itself. But, in fact, context does matter. On the one hand, there's too much art, and on the other, there's just too little information, at least for the folks who aren't well-versed in contemporary art, which is a huge chunk of the audience MOCAD claims to serve.

Admittedly, the show doesn't profess to be anything more than one individual's take on contemporary art. The question is, then, what to make of that. In the catalog (which is really a glorified checklist), Aaron says he's drawn to artists who are "risk-takers," and yet there's very little alternative media, such as video and digital, that so many artists are currently exploring. It's mostly what Detroit sculptor Robert Beilat calls "flat art," work that's comfortable minding its place on the wall — painting, photography, mixed media and the odd textile. True to the exhibition's title, it's basically a lot of stuff. That's OK in a private collection, but is it enough from an institution that's set itself up to enlighten local viewers about contemporary art in the grander scheme of things? If, for example, the show had been installed in chronological order of acquisition, it might at least offer some

Admittedly, MOCAD found a way to mount a large-scale show on a shoestring budget. And *Stuff* affords the Detroit public a rare opportunity to see a private collection featuring art loaned out all over the world, from the Whitney Museum to the Carnegie International to the Tate. But the problem is what the marketplace does with that. Museum exhibitions add to an artwork's provenance — the pedigree that certifies its journey from merely "likable" to "important," a distinction reflected in price. A show such as this undoubtedly certifies the value of Aaron's collection, in this case, nearly *all* of it: About 85 percent to 90 percent of it is on view. In response to this, Aaron says he has agreed not to sell any work in the show for the next two years.

But as a trustee of a nonprofit institution, Aaron needs to avoid even the appearance of conflict of interest. Compromised integrity shouldn't be an issue at a museum that's just getting started and has so many eyes on it. The American Association of Museums' Code of Ethics for Museums, adopted in 1999, specifically states that "Loyalty to the mission of the museum and to the public it serves is the essence of museum work, whether volunteer or paid. Where conflicts of interest arise — actual, potential or perceived — the duty of loyalty must never be compromised. No individual may use his or her position in a museum for personal gain or the benefit another at the expense of the museum, its mission, its reputation and the society it serves."

In response, MOCAD's acting director Marsha Miro maintains AAM finds no correlation between a museum exhibiting a work of art and its subsequent economic value. But several seasoned curators speaking on condition of anonymity don't believe that claim. Miro also argues that, according to AAM, the fact that MOCAD isn't a collecting institution means there's no conflict of interest in showing a trustee's personal collection. Maybe MOCAD doesn't stand to gain any *art* from Aaron, but they've no doubt got one happy trustee on their hands.

Curators offer a range of opinions on the subject, from some who find it appalling to others who don't think ethics is an issue, if the work is worth it. A couple of them acknowledge a changing landscape. "The precedent is being established by the biggest institutions," one curator says. The Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art have all showcased private collections in recent years.

The determining factor, according to another curator, is whether the show is an artistic success, whether or not Burt Aaron is a good curator of his own work. In the eyes of this beholder, he isn't. One hopes that as MOCAD continues to evolve, they take themselves and their audience more seriously.

Stuff: International Contemporary Art from the Collection of Burt Aaron runs through July 29 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, 4454 Woodward Ave., Detroit; 313-832-6622.

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