Hirshhorn Receives Gifts of Major Artworks by Joseph Cornell, Camille Henrot, Sabine Hornig, Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler, William Kentridge, Raphael Montañez Ortiz, Salvatore Scarpitta and Frank Thiel

Recent Gifts Across a Variety of Media Prepare the Way for the Museum’s 40th Anniversary

As it looks toward its 40th anniversary in October 2014, the Smithsonian’s Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden is pleased to announce donations of important artworks in sculpture, photography, printmaking, performance and video. “With this group of acquisitions, we strengthen our in-depth holdings of key figures in our collection at the same time that we expand the boundaries of the contemporary with works by emerging artists,” said Hirshhorn interim director and chief curator Kerry Brougher. “In the past several months, we have been overwhelmed by the generosity of our donors, including trustees, former trustees, artists and estates, among others.”

The Hirshhorn’s collection is strong in the work of Joseph Cornell (American, b. Nyack, New York, 1903–1972), which received a gallery of its own in the recent exhibition “Over, Under, Next: Experiments in Mixed Media, 1913–Present.” The donation of “Untitled (Aviary with Yellow Birds)” (c. 1948), is a major addition and the first of the artist’s “aviaries,” box constructions populated with representations of birds, to enter the collection. Although Cornell’s intimate tableaux first won recognition in connection with Surrealism, he later distanced himself from the movement’s often violent and confrontational imagery, preferring instead to inhabit personal domains of fantasy and memory. The work is a gift of Hirshhorn trustee Robert Lehrman and Aimee Lehrman, in honor of former Hirshhorn director James T. Demetrion.

The product of a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship that brought Camille Henrot (French, b. Paris, 1978; lives and works in New York) into contact with collections and scholars at the National
Museum of the American Indian, the National Museum of Natural History, the National Museum of American History and the Archives of American Art, “Grosse Fatigue” (2013) compresses the history of the universe into thirteen minutes of video. Accompanied by an incantatory spoken-word text performed by musician Akwetey Orraca-Tetteh and a tautly rhythmic score by Joakim Bouaziz, cascades of pop-up windows signal the overflow of representation in the digital age. In June, after showing “Grosse Fatigue” at the Venice Biennale, Henrot was awarded the Silver Lion for “contributing a new work that in a sensuous and dynamic manner is able to capture our times.” The first work by Henrot to enter the collection, “Grosse Fatigue” is a gift of Kamel Mennour and the artist.

Former trustee Barbara Levine and Aaron Levine have generously donated three large-scale photographic works, significantly enhancing the Hirshhorn’s holdings of contemporary photography. Representative of a new generation of artists that engages memory, perception and imagination through the intersection of photography, sculpture and architecture, Sabine Hornig (German, b. Pforzheim, 1964; lives and works in Berlin) has been photographing reflections of storefront windows and glass facades in and around Berlin since 2001. In “Nr. 4” (2003), one of the signature images in her photographic oeuvre, multiple overlapping layers, seen both directly and through reflections, confound the eye and complicate the distinction between public and private space.

Represented by their film “Eight,” (2001), in the 2008 Hirshhorn exhibition “The Cinema Effect: Illusion, Reality, and the Moving Image, Part I: Dreams,” Teresa Hubbard (Irish, b. Dublin, 1965) and Alexander Birchler (Swiss, b. Baden, 1962) create sites for narratives that exist at the threshold between fiction and reality. A rigorously composed photograph that peers down into a small room undergoing renovation, “Gregor’s Room III” (1999) is the final element of a three-part work that revolves around the reconstructed bedroom of Gregor Samsa, the hapless antihero of Franz Kafka’s “Metamorphosis,” who awakens one morning to find himself “transformed in his own bed into a monstrous vermin.”

The photography of Frank Thiel (German, b. 1966, Kleinmachnow; lives and works in Berlin) examines the ongoing transformation of Berlin, a city he has described as suffering “from an overdose of history” at the same time that it has become “the youngest city in the world.” Concerning itself with the simultaneous transformation of political and architectural space, Thiel’s work exists at the intersection of ideology and aesthetics. Often, as in “Stadt 2/51/A” (2001), his camera interrupts the construction process, capturing a site on its way to becoming something else.
The subject of a retrospective that appeared at the Hirshhorn in 2001, William Kentridge (South African, b. Johannesburg, 1955; lives and works in Johannesburg) is best known for films that poetically address the fraught history and politics of contemporary South Africa using a stop-motion animation technique in which he continually erases, alters and reshoots a series of charcoal drawings. Based on a series of engravings from 1747 by William Hogarth, Kentridge’s “Industry and Idleness” (1986–87) sets the earlier moral tale in Apartheid-era South Africa, viewing its characters’ downfalls through the lenses of privilege and privation. This portfolio of etchings, a gift of Laurel Barron Mendelsohn, well complements the ten works by Kentridge that the Hirshhorn already owns, becoming the earliest works by the artist in the collection and establishing themes he would return to in subsequent drawings and films.

The remnants of a destroyed piano from a performance by Raphael Montañez Ortiz (American, b. Brooklyn, New York, 1934) at the opening of Damage Control: Art and Destruction Since 1950 Oct. 25, 2013, “Piano Destruction Concert: The Little Dog Laughed to See Such Sport: Reminiscing about Duncan Terrace DIAS Piano Destruction Concert, 1966: Spring Can Really Hang You Up the Most” (2013) is currently installed in the exhibition’s opening gallery on the second level of the museum. As its title suggests, the work is both an extension of the Piano Destruction Concert the artist performed at the original Destruction in Art Symposium in London in 1966 and a transformation of the original idea. Circumscribed by a ritually drawn line of salt, it is both a document of the performance and an embodiment of the performance itself. Footage of the entire 2013 concert can be seen on the Hirshhorn’s website. The addition of this work, a gift of the artist, to the collection further emphasizes the integrated role of exhibitions and collections at the Hirshhorn.

This symbiotic approach is also evident in the recent acquisition of three major works by Salvatore Scarpitta (American, b. New York City, 1919–2007), which join “Snowshoe Sled” (1974), a 2012 gift, to make the Hirshhorn an unparalleled public repository of the artist’s work. As part of the 40th anniversary celebration, the Hirshhorn is planning a series of focus exhibitions about individual artists who have been collected in depth. The first of these, opening July 17, 2014, examines Scarpitta’s wide-ranging and idiosyncratic career. Raised in Los Angeles, Scarpitta studied and for two decades worked in Italy, where he participated in the emerging avant-garde scene that included figures such as Alberto Burri, Piero Dorazio and Lucio Fontana. In 1958, Scarpitta moved to New York and joined the stable of Leo Castelli, where his work was shown alongside that of Lee Bontecou, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, among others.
Related to developments in both Pop and Arte Povera and yet standing apart from either tendency, Scarpitta’s work arises from his interest in speed, racing and the isolating self-transformation of the personal journey. In the mid-1960s he embarked on a series of full-size interpretations of sprint racecars. The last of these, “Sal Cragar” (1969), is an elegiac, austere shell of a car, deliberately left unfinished. Reflecting a period when Scarpitta, under Castelli’s sponsorship, owned an actual racing team, “Trevis Race Car (Sal Gambler Special)” (1985) is a functioning winged sprint car that the artist appointed with a Pop-style paint job and retired to the gallery. With these acquisitions, the Hirshhorn becomes the sole institution in the United States to own examples of Scarpitta’s racecars. Of nine cars extant, seven are in European public and private collections.

Handmade from found materials, Scarpitta’s sleds represent a streamlining of the racing metaphor into more solitary, nomadic wandering. Bearing a load of burnt wood, the remnants of a roadside sign hit by lightning, the funereal “Cot and Lock Step n. 2 Cargo” (1989–2000) emphasizes both human resourcefulness and vulnerability. “Sal Cragar” is a Museum purchase, “Trevis Race Car (Sal Gambler Special)” is a gift of Stella Alba Cartaino and Gregory O’Neill and “Cot and Lock Step n. 2 Cargo” is a gift of Luca Patrizio DiBenedetto.

About the Hirshhorn

The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the Smithsonian Institution’s museum of international modern and contemporary art, has nearly 12,000 paintings, sculptures, photographs, mixed-media installations, works on paper and new media works in its collection. The Hirshhorn presents diverse exhibitions and offers an array of public programs that explore modern and contemporary art. Located at Independence Avenue and Seventh Street S.W., the museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. (closed Dec. 25). Admission to the galleries and special programs is free. For more information about exhibitions and events, visit hirshhorn.si.edu. Follow the Hirshhorn on Facebook at facebook.com/hiroshhorn and on Twitter at twitter.com/hiroshhorn. Or sign up for the museum’s eBlasts at hirshhorn.si.edu/collection/social-media. To request accessibility services, contact Kristy Maruca at marucak@si.edu or (202) 633-2796, preferably two weeks in advance.

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