a new direction

Established by Lerner as a group exhibition program in 1979, the format of Directions changed in 1987 under Ned Rifkin, then chief curator of the Hirshhorn and now the Smithsonian’s under secretary for art. Rifkin maintained the essence of the first three group installations but re-focused the series to highlight the work of a single artist and his or her production, beginning with Joel Shapiro. While this exhibition included work made early in Shapiro’s career, the new Directions approach also encouraged the artist to seek new ways of expression by including a commission of a new work. A catalogue that included excerpts from an interview between Rifkin and Shapiro further enhanced the exhibition by providing insight into the artist’s thought process.

Presenting new work and putting the artist’s voice forward has been a mission of the program and of the Museum ever since. We celebrate this approach now as we mark twenty years of providing individual artists with a place to explore their ideas.

the artists

Directions allows the Hirshhorn to present emerging as well as established artists. Some of the best known and groundbreaking artists of our time have participated in the series, including Cindy Sherman, Tim Hawkinson, James Turrell, Juan Muñoz, and Julian Schnabel. Many of these artists showed at the Hirshhorn early in their careers, like Tony Oursler, Tacita Dean, and Jeff Wall. Others, such as Ron Mueck, realized their first museum installation through this program. The Museum has since acquired a number of works by these artists for its collection. Conceived of as a way to address the vitality, diversity, and inventiveness that characterizes contemporary art, Directions has inspired artists to employ an amazing range of practices, media, concepts, and techniques over the years. They have arranged towers of hangers and plastic bottles (Dan Steinhilber), draped hundreds of yards of brightly colored fabric (Beverly Semmes), lead fifty members of the public through a day-long spontaneously generated performance (Oliver Herring), intrigued visitors with larger-than-life hyper real human figures (Ron Mueck), and have even presented ideas for work that was never realized (Cai Guo-Qiang).

Among the possibilities for engagement available to artists and audiences at the Hirshhorn, Directions has consistently proven to be forward looking, flexible, and experimental in its approach. Maintaining a spirit of discovery and fearless ingenuity is an essential component to keeping the Directions series fresh and the Hirshhorn at the forefront of contemporary art for years to come.

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