

With bold strokes, Stanford show paints clear picture that art should be enjoyed

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Museumgoers find exhibitions so buttressed with text and technology these days that they easily lose sight of pleasure as the ultimate reason to see a show.

The curators at Stanford's Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts, mindful of working for a teaching museum, have given some thematic order to "Picasso to Thiebaud: Modern and Contemporary Art From the Collections of Stanford University Alumni and Friends." But its bounty of pleasant surprises finally makes the show worth visiting.

Familiar names stud the lists of artists and of lenders. The latter include Doris and Donald Fisher, John and Gretchen Berggruen, Rita and Toby Schreiber, Phyllis Diebenkorn, and Frances and John Bowes.

An event such as this throws down an important challenge to younger generations of collectors and aspiring collectors among Stanford graduates and donors. As long as the modern and contemporary art market reflects American society's extreme disparities in wealth, university museums, like their civic counterparts, will grow ever more dependent on rich patrons to build collections.

Everyone who sees the current show must wonder what its counterpart 20 or 25 years hence may contain.

With so many younger artists today forsaking painting and sculpture for video, photography, digital and conceptual strategies, might the meaning and value of looking at art, and living with it, change beyond recognition?

The title "Picasso to Thiebaud" suggests a line, though a circuitous one, drawn from the roots to the flowering of modernist painting, as well as from European to Californian modes of artistic individualism.

Wayne Thiebaud may seem several worlds away from the innovations that made Picasso the man to beat for ambitious painters for half a century. But Thiebaud's "Dark Land" (1997), an elevated fantasy view of farmland and river, toys with vanishing points and depictive paradox in ways even Picasso might recognize as distant echoes of cubism.

One passage in the show begins with still lifes, "Scissors" (1959) and "Knife and Tomato" (1963), by Richard Diebenkorn, flanking David Bates' "Purple Iris" (1997), which ruggedly evokes van Gogh and features a knife that recalls the lore of van Gogh's self-mutilation.

On the same wall, the eye goes immediately to Rebecca Horn's motorized sculpture "The Polish Sisters" (1994), in which a yardstick swings below from wires hooked to upright pairs of snipping scissors.

Alongside the Horn hangs Jim Dine's "The Yellow Painting" (1972-73), in which real tools, including bolt-cutters and pliers, suggest characters in some cryptic allegory of studio life.

William Bailey's "Still Life Torre" (1984) serves as a classical coda to this rambunctious sequence. Its depicted shelf, crowded with bowls and other vessels, rhymes with the real shelf Dine attached to his painting.

Other affinities among works on view declare themselves less openly or less suggestively. The soft rectangles that fill Sean Scully's sumptuous painting "Pink Wall of Light" (2002) echo the uncarved top halves of the square cedar beams in Ursula von Rydingsvard's sculpture "Pink Companion" (1991), standing nearby.

The rounded bottom profile of Robert Mangold's shaped abstraction "X Series -- Central Diagonal 1 (A)" (1968) rhymes with the curve of the string that drapes across Jasper Johns' painting "Bridge" (1997). The two pictures, which hang side by side, have diamond shapes in common as well, though little comes of these resemblances.

Here and there the linkages among objects work less overtly, as in a group devoted to poetry as inspiration, which brings together paintings by Larry Rivers and Jess and a sculpture by H.C. Westermann.

A few things on view seem to signal to one another across distances. Color field abstractions by Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis help us recognize the humorous nod to "post-painterly abstraction" in Alex Katz's huge seascape "Marine 2" (1997).

Finally, the Cantor show owes its excitement to the surprise of individual works: a small 1950 drip painting by Jackson Pollock, a gripping portrait by Frank Auerbach, a superb 1916 Juan Gris still life in which an abstracted human figure winks from a wine glass, a

late '40s David Smith that almost reads as an allegory of his struggle to fight free of Surrealism.

Any museum, not just any university museum, would welcome the chance to present "Picasso to Thiebaud."

Picasso to Thiebaud: Modern and Contemporary Art From the Collections of Stanford University Alumni and Friends. Painting and sculpture. Through June 20. Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University, Stanford. (650) 723-4177, www.stanford.edu/dept/ccva/.

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