



Robert Motherwell's *Untitled (Beside the Sea)*: surprising connections.



One fine lineup includes head and torso images by John Graham (left), Susan Rothenberg (below right), and Lucien Freud (bottom).



Art and soul

Museums: SAM's new curator brings curiosity and conviction to the permanent collection. By **Sheila Farr**

Normally a show from the collection of Seattle Art Museum doesn't create much of a stir—it's like a gathering of old friends. "Collection Highlights: 1945 to the Present," however, has drawn intense interest and speculation from the local art community: People are hoping to discern in it something about the character of SAM's new chief curator

Collection Highlights: 1945 to the Present
Curated by Trevor Fairbrother
Seattle Art Museum, through June 1

and deputy director, Trevor Fairbrother, recently arrived from his post as contemporary art curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. With considerable control over SAM's exhibition schedule and acquisition processes, Fairbrother is in a position to help redefine the museum's profile and direction.

Since the museum expanded into its downtown facility in 1991, it's taken a more active role in the community and emphasized inclusion of black, Asian, Hispanic, and other minority cultural groups in museum programming. It put on permanent display works from the Katherine White African collection, the Northwest Coast Native American collections, the Asian, and Decorative Arts collections, as well as a constant rotation from the Contem-



Large Head by Lucien Freud: SAM strength.

porary and Northwest collections. It offers new interactive computer technology, with lobby terminals for visitors to peruse the museum's holdings. Yet in SAM's haste to become more populist, it sacrificed the confidence and regular attendance of many of its most discerning and ardent supporters, especially the region's artists, who crave and rely on the stimulation of seeing challenging art, be it historical or cutting edge, regional or international.

Ironically, with the museum's leaders focused on the institution's economic viability—cultivating membership, grants, and future gifts—they have let slide the excitement of the exhibition schedule and the focus on contemporary art. In the past five years, the only contemporary art show curated in-house for the second floor special exhibitions galleries was the Chihuly exhibit in 1992. The last contemporary traveling exhibition was "Susan Rothenberg: Paintings and Drawings" in 1993. The last blockbuster event in contemporary art I remember was "Against Nature" a provocative show of Japanese art installed at the Volunteer Park museum. That was before the downtown museum opened.

If Fairbrother's choices in "Exhibition Highlights" can be used as an oracle, things should be changing. For the first time in a long time, I breathed a sigh of pleasure and relief in SAM's galleries. Not that excellent artworks haven't been on display all along, but I haven't felt the

"Collection Highlights" contains pieces never exhibited at SAM before, including a couple of exceptional works from the estate of Mark Tobey. One of them, an entrancing Claire Falkenstein wall sculpture, is a piece that Fairbrother discovered in the stacks, but which had not been officially added to the museum's holdings. (That mistake was immediately rectified.) The untitled sculpture, fashioned of welded wire, is a delicate, round filagree, like an elegant tumbleweed entangled in its own elaborate shadow on the wall. It's easy to see why Tobey was attracted to the piece. It plays beautifully with his own intricate abstractions, especially a tiny red jewel of a painting, an untitled tempera piece from the late '50s, that Fairbrother selected to hang nearby. The jumbled motion of the



'Collection Highlights' displays Fairbrother's passions and sensibilities.

This isn't a show about individual artworks. It's about connections, influences, visual trends. And it's masterfully installed in coherent groupings that give an indication of the strengths of the museum's holdings in several areas, starting off with the brassy 1960s Pop Art and California funk movements. For this section Fairbrother chose to pull out of the stacks for the first time Robert Arneson's full-size, brazenly colorful ceramic toilet, punningly called *John of Art*. The unflushed bowl holds, for those who care to look in, a congealed extrusion that viscerally links art and nature.

The body of the show is more introspective, and especially notable for several stunning groupings of work. One is a cluster that thoughtfully links the crescent curves and earthy color of George Tsutakawa's wood sculpture *Obos 1* with a lyrical Sam Francis watercolor, Peter Voulkos's stoneware *Ceramic Drawing*, and the subtle swoops and dives of the imagery in Arshile Gorky's painting *How My Mother's Embroidered Apron Unfolds in My Life*. A second fine juxtaposition includes a lineup of head and torso images by John Graham (this is another strange, captivating, previously unshown piece from the Tobey estate), Willem DeKooning, Susan Rothenberg, Lucien Freud, and a glass head fashioned by Tobey, with help from local craftsmen, during a trip to Venice. Each of the portraits is abuzz with energy and unspecified emotion, perfectly complemented by the Manuel Neri bronze figure poised in front of them.

Fairbrother covered all his bases in this show. He managed to meaningfully inte-

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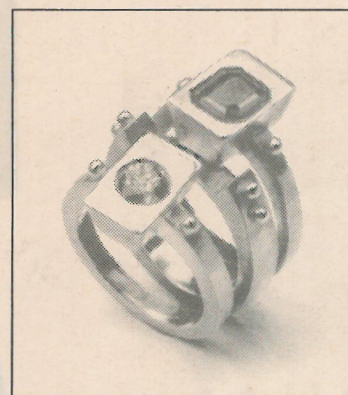
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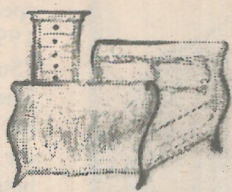


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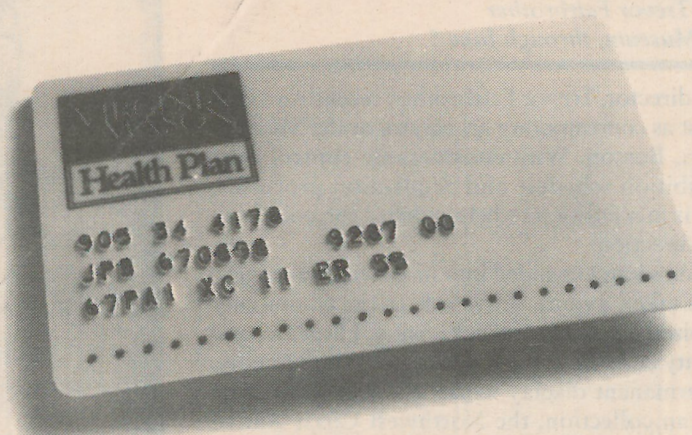
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grate international and Northwest artists, acknowledge important contributions by local collectors (Warhol's portrait of museum trustee Jane Lang is included, as well as the Alice Neel portrait of her late husband, Richard Lang), make a clear statement of the museum's strengths, reveal surprises in the collection, and confidently display some of his own passions and sensibilities. He did it seamlessly.

Fairbrother describes putting together "Collection Highlights" as a crash course in learning the museum's holdings. He officially arrived at SAM on August 1, and immediately dove into curating the show, already on the roster for September 12. With a computer print-out of the collection in hand, he rummaged through the stacks without any particular theme in mind as he assembled the work. "The previous show was minimalism, so people needed something different," Fairbrother said. "I do believe in balance—and I have eclectic tastes—so in a way I ended up doing three or four shows within a show." He also made time to see that the Pollack and Gorky paintings were reframed. "The Pollack needs to be protected, but the plastic was too close to the surface of the painting: It seemed a little embalmed. Now it has room to breathe." On the Gorky, a half inch of the edge of the

canvas had been covered by the previous frame and is now fully exposed.

Overseeing expansion of SAM's collections is a significant part of Fairbrother's job, and something he looks forward to. He won't comment on the museum's acquisitions prior to his arrival, including the puzzling, uneven selection in the "Recent Northwest Acquisitions" exhibition, on display when he started his job. "I can't talk about how things were done in the past. I wasn't here. All I can say is how things will be. . . I definitely intend to be central to the acquisition process. As chief curator, I have to be the guiding light. . . I should be very clear about that. I'm not going to have something that I don't approve of in the collection, and Mimi [Neill] is not either." Fairbrother said that his predecessor, Patterson Sims, set the museum up well for future gifts by actively seeking out collectors and encouraging their purchases and patronage. Although that might seem the most practical course with the museum perennially short on funds, Fairbrother thinks it is only part of the equation. "Personally, I would argue that we need to fund acquisitions right now. . . It's the same kind of balancing act you have to do with blue-chip art versus risks. You have to be taking risks or it's going to be boring."

At present Fairbrother finds the collection strong in several areas. "The spread is

OK," he said. "With promised gifts we'll be very set up with abstract expressionism and color field paintings; the same with Pop. Minimalism is good, with the Carl Andres, the Judds, with Mangold, and Agnes Martin. . . . From then on, in the '70s and '80s there are gaps. . . . Hopefully we'll be buying from all over, regionally and internationally, in the three to ten thousand dollar range."

Fairbrother also stresses that SAM needs to have separate funds for each curatorial department. "I think the budget for acquisitions in general needs to be built, and in doing that every area needs to have their own fund, however small." For example, the Native American collection has no specially earmarked funds. Even the already vast African collection, Fairbrother contends, will need cultivation. "I believe in room for growth. We have a curator to look after it. . . I don't like the idea of it just being static. All collections need to grow."

When it comes to pruning the collections, he is more cautious. "Personally I'm fairly conservative about that. It's all right to do it, but again, you have to work very hard. And there are ethical issues involved. Ideally you only deaccession to upgrade what you already have. If you sell a Mark Tobey, it's to buy a better one. You don't want to sell Tobey's to buy some new, fashionable thing, or to install a new lighting system." What Fairbrother would like to

see is the museum creating more traveling exhibitions, getting objects from the collection in circulation to other museums. Currently, he says, Steve Brown, curator of Northwest Indian art, is organizing a traveling show called "Native Visions" for 1998. Fairbrother is planning an exhibit of the Virginia and Bagley Wright collection for national tour in the next few years.

Fairbrother and the European painting curator, Chiyo Ishikawa, are in the process of putting together a show for the second floor galleries titled "Seattle Collects Paintings: Works from Private Collections." Featuring pieces from the 17th century to the present, the show is slated to open in May. It will be the first painting exhibit curated in-house for the second floor special exhibition galleries. "I understand there haven't been many painting shows," Fairbrother said, "and it's good homework for me. I'd have to see all these collections anyway."

As he and Ishikawa visit local collectors, Fairbrother said that they are open to all possibilities. "I'm eager to have a balance. Of course we'll include work from major collections that are already known. But at the other end of the spectrum, it would be good to find some beginning collectors. We are looking for the best, of course, but also for surprises, for things that may have been overlooked." ■

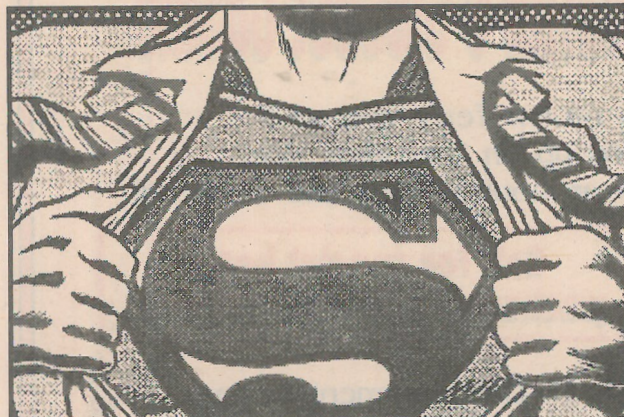
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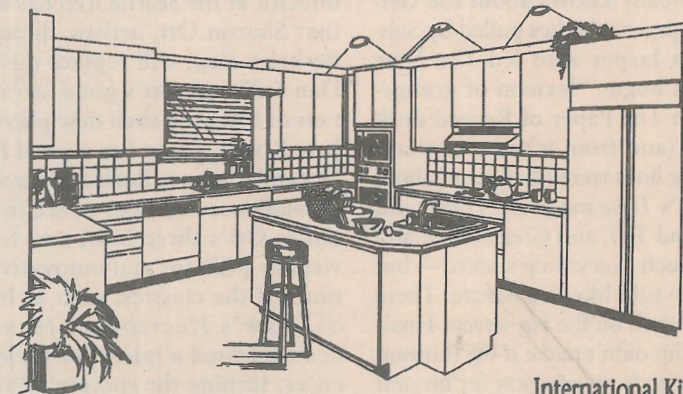
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