

Collecting

Brooklyn Museum director on collecting art by women

The museum has acquired 96 works by contemporary female artists — a living legacy of women's practice

Anne Pasternak, photographed at Brooklyn Museum last year © Hiroko Masuike/New York Times/Redux/Eyevine
Caroline Roux APRIL 27, 2018

Anyone visiting the Brooklyn Museum in the past 18 months will have found it hard to avoid work by women artists, which is still not the case in many other institutions. Its “Year of Yes: Reimagining Feminism” programme kicked off in October 2016, and has included exhibitions of [Georgia O’Keefe](#); African American practitioners of the 1960s-1980s; gender transformation in ancient Egypt; and a life drawing class devised by Jeremy Deller and featuring not the usual female subject, but rock icon [Iggy Pop](#).

Radical Women, the show bringing the programme to a close, features work by 123 Latin American artists from 15 countries, many of them ruled by oppressive regimes.

The series of events celebrates 10 years of the museum’s Elizabeth A Sackler Centre for Feminist Art (the benefactor is not from the branch of the family recently exposed for profiting from opioids) and the museum’s director Anne Pasternak — with the centre’s senior curator Catherine Morris — has also taken the opportunity to acquire 96 works by contemporary female artists. A year of shows is good, but a living legacy of women’s practice is rather better.

Pasternak’s collecting policy is both political and economic. Brooklyn Museum, at around 560,000 sq ft, is New York’s third largest in terms of physical scale, and has 1.5m works. But its operating budget is just \$36m a year, and it is dwarfed in every sense by New York’s only other encyclopedic museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art. (To give some context, the \$43m a year the Met earns in admission fees represents about 14 per cent of its operating budget, according to a New Yorker article published in January.)

Since Pasternak joined the Brooklyn Museum in 2015, she has insisted that the museum’s unique — some might say disadvantaged — circumstances, “just gives us more reason to do things differently. Right now, we’re working on a collection strategy where we can be additive in a city with great collecting power. We’re looking at the areas where people haven’t caught up and great work is still available to us. Equally it’s about including those who’ve historically been

missed out. In an ideal world, this collecting by category wouldn't be the case. But why ignore the truth? I'd rather help correct the situation than continue the inequity."

Nona Faustine's 'Over My Dead Body, Tweed Courthouse, Brooklyn, NY' (2013) © Nona Faustine

The young African-American artist Nona Faustine, whose self-portraiture places her in sites all over New York associated with slavery, is among those whose work is now part of the museum's holdings. "I hate categories and labels," she says. "And I'd rather be seen as just an artist. But I don't have that privilege right now. And if this strand of acquisition opens the door for women artists, then that's what matters. What women artists want most is to be visible."

Other artists include the Nigerian Betye Saar — once part of the 1970s Black Arts movement — and Marilyn Minter, whose glittery, pornographic imagery played havoc with feminist orthodoxy in the 1990s. More predictably, a 50-strong portfolio of posters by the feminist campaigners Guerrilla Girls has made the cut.

Pasternak, who is 53, has taken a polemical position at the museum. In her first month, she decided on a rehang of its American collection that would unravel issues of identity — "We don't have a true understanding of who is American. We need to define that," she says — and the uncomfortable truths behind the building of the nation. "People like the heroic and the celebratory," she says. "But we're talking about eradication of native peoples, civil war, slavery." The reinstallation was carried out in six months for just \$60,000.

Delia Cancela's 'Destroyed heart' (1964) © Mauro Herlitzka

Dust has since been blown off the rooms showing ancient Egyptian and European art, and if she could, Pasternak would rotate work freely. "A museum shouldn't be static, people should keep having reasons to come back," she says.

Coming from Pasternak, this is no great surprise. As director of the non-profit organisation Creative Time from 1994 to 2015, she staged a series of remarkable public artworks all over New York, including Nick Cave's invasion of Grand Central Station with a 30-strong herd of highly decorated horses and Vik Munoz's cloud paintings — cartoon bunnies evaporating in the skies over Manhattan — in the summer of 2001. "I understand audience reactions and responses," she says. "It has given me a great grounding for working in an institution."

To those who point to a lack of museology and a strong leaning towards contemporary art, she says that she is "a generalist" and points out that museum attendance has risen under her tenure and 52 per cent of visitors come from the locality. "We do not rely on tourism," she says, presumably thinking of her Museum Mile cousins.

Nonetheless, Pasternak is currently embroiled in a fracas, started by local pressure groups, over the appointment of a white curator, Kristen Windmuller-Luna, to head up the African Art department. Pasternak’s defence is that the historic pan-continental collection required a certain kind of specialist. “We found an incredible scholar,” she says of Windmuller-Luna.

“What’s more important is that only two people a year in North America graduate with PhDs in historic African art. We should be more concerned about structural racism. This has simply put a spotlight on how that plays out in the end.” An argument, perhaps, that will appear in a rehang soon.

‘Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985’, to July 22; [brooklynmuseum.org](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org)

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