

“EVERY PICTURE TELLS A STORY” AT PARRISH ART MUSEUM

By Michael Trauring – November 6, 2018



Fred W. McDarrah (American, 1926-2007)
Willem de Kooning, East Hampton, 1978 (printed ca. 1978)
Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, New York, Purchase from
the Estate of Fred W. McDarrah via Steven Kasher Gallery

Every year, for the past six years, the curatorial team at the Parrish Art Museum has sat around a conference table with one daunting task: to consider more than 3,000 works of art.

Each is beautiful in its own way — whether visually, contextually, or both — but only 3 percent ever make the cut.

Spread across seven galleries, the works need to breathe and converse with one other, just as the team did in anticipation of the Water Mill museum’s sixth anniversary show, explained director Terrie Sultan. They mulled over the permanent collection through the lens of their discussions, interpretations and pertinent current events, until a theme finally emerged: “Every Picture Tells A Story.”

“If you give somebody an overarching theme that every one of these pictures has a story to tell, it’s an entry point into actually looking at the work and thinking, ‘Okay, what is this picture saying to me?’ or ‘Is there a story I can relate to?’”

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Sultan said. "It's a mixture of being a little bit tongue-in-cheek, in terms of some things you could be thinking about when you're looking at these works of art, and then the very serious aspect of what's going on in our world and the stories that we're telling each other."

Three bodies of work gifted to the museum within the last year served as the initial momentum behind those first brainstorming sessions, Sultan said. The exhibition — on view from Sunday, November 11, through October 3, 2019 — leads with the trio of recent acquisitions, which includes a series of 27 iconic artist portraits by photographer Fred W. McDarrah, paired with examples of works by the artists pictured.

The legacy of the East End dominates a portion of the series, with Norman Bluhm at work in his studio and the familiar faces of Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Roy Lichtenstein and Robert Motherwell, all of whom live on in the Parrish permanent collection.

"There's a wonderful portrait that shows a group of artists who obviously became very, very famous later on — Claes Oldenburg, Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselmann, James Rosenquist, Roy Lichtenstein — all standing around in front of an Andy Warhol painting. The men are all wearing ties," Sultan said with a laugh. "It's like, really? They dressed like that in those days. And you look at how young they are, and you think, 'Wow that is just amazing.'"

New acquisitions by Tom Blackwell and Bertrand Meneil inspired the gallery of Photorealist paintings, which introduce a dialogue about the relationship of interior and exterior space that mirrors the Parrish's architectural design — the broad panes of glass, slit windows and skylights encouraging a connection of art and nature — while paintings by Ron Kleemann, Yigal Ozeri, Charles Bell and Audrey Flack balance composition complexity with suggested narratives.

"The story behind Photorealism is not only about the fact that artists began using cameras as a way of recording images from which they could build their painting, but they are very much about a specific place and time," Sultan said. "There are a lot of levels to the storytelling that can happen with a Photorealist painting."

The final acquisitions from artist David Salle tell the biggest story of all, based on Michelangelo's "The Last Judgment," captured and re-imagined in three monumental oils on canvas, shown for the first time in the United States.

The cycle was commissioned in 2004 by art collector Carlo Bilotti for the Museo Carlo Bilotti in Rome and created by Salle between 2005 and 2006 in East Hampton. Recognizing Salle's decades-long ties to the East End, Bilotti's widow Margaret S. Bilotti gifted the works to the Parrish.

"I think they're masterpieces," Sultan said. "I think that they show David at some of his best visual composition making. It shows him to be the kind of thoughtful, historically minded artist that he is, and that he responded to this notion of a commissioned work based on the Sistine Chapel and yet made it very definitively Salle pictures, and they're just executed so beautifully.

"There's a collage of images that's rooted in his own work and art history and everyday life, and pictures that are taken from other sources," she continued. "It all comes together in this brilliant way."

The remaining quartet of mini-exhibitions shine a light on older bodies of work and paint them in new contexts, including that by one of the East End's founding artists William Merritt Chase, juxtaposed by the art of his students in the Shinnecock Hills Summer School of Art.

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“In addition to showing him and his students, we are working with historian David Martine, who is helping us to mine our archives of Chase to discuss the context in which the Shinnecock School interacted with the inhabitants of the Shinnecock Indian Reservation,” Sultan said. “There will be a lot of didactic material that talks about the importance of that particular interaction, which is the untold story.”

For many artists, the creative process is also a rarely seen element of their work. But when Fairfield Porter died in Southampton in 1975, his widow gifted the Parrish with the entire contents of his studio.

Not only did they find finished paintings, but there were rough sketches of ideas taking shape, and works that lied somewhere in between — to be on view as “Fairfield Porter Raw: The Creative Process of an American Master.”

“We’re not even sure how the artist felt about them,” Sultan said of the unfinished pieces. “This is the kind of thing that most people don’t ever get a chance to see. Since we had the ability to do that, we took advantage of it to put together this project that shows the varying stages that go into creating a picture.”

The exhibition “Louisa Chase: Below the Surface” is also in memoriam — an homage to the bold artist who was on the cusp between representation and abstraction, rediscovering the power of painting on canvas and using imagery, even in an intangible way, before her death in May 2016 at her home in East Hampton.

“I can say this is a very personal project for me because Louisa and I were classmates in undergraduate art school. I have an emotional attachment to her and her work, but I also feel very strongly about her and her career,” Sultan said. “Of course, I never went anywhere with my creative career as an artist, but it certainly informed my life as a museum professional, and she and I were friends.”

The thematic gallery, “Black & White,” closes out the anniversary exhibition with the sly allusion that, in this particular day and age, “it may be nice to think about things in shades of grey,” Sultan said, while exploring the nuance between dark and light in work by Donald Sultan, Hector Leonardi and Lucien Smith, to name a few.

“This is our sixth iteration of the permanent collection and every year, I say, ‘This is the best one yet,’ and I really feel very strongly that this is an incredibly strong installation that will keep people engaged for the entire year,” Sultan said. “The first five years in this new building have been absolutely transformational for all of us, and now we’re launching the next five years with this new iteration — and we want people to come and experience it, see it and enjoy it.”

“Every Picture Tells A Story” will be on view from Sunday, November 11, through October 3, 2019, at the Parrish Art Museum, located at 279 Montauk Highway in Water Mill. A Fresh Look Benefit Cocktail Party will be held on Saturday, November 10, from 6 to 8 p.m. at the museum. Tickets are \$200, or \$150 for members.

To see the new exhibition free of cost, swing by the Parrish Art Museum Community Day on Sunday, November 11, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Activities are scheduled from 12 to 3 p.m. For more information, call (631) 283-2118 or visit parrishart.org.