

# **Contemporary Art at the Dallas Museum of Art**

*John R. Lane*

JACKSON POLLOCK'S 1947 PAINTING *Cathedral* is, literally, the founding object in the Dallas Museum of Art's contemporary collection. One contemplates this phenomenon in a state of wonder. It is not just that, in 1950, the Museum, then called the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts were the first public institutions to acquire a classic-period work by the greatest of all twentieth-century American artists or that this abstract expressionist masterpiece is now, by a long way, the most valuable object in the Museum's collection. It is also that, with the benefit of more than five decades of hindsight, if one were today to dream up the perfect collection of art made since World War II, it would have to start exactly here with Pollock, perhaps even with this very work. But when DMA trustee Stanley Marcus orchestrated the donation of *Cathedral* to Dallas from a New York friend, there was virtually no context for the painting either in the Museum or the city.

From its establishment in 1903 as the Dallas Art Association, one of the Museum's missions has been to collect and exhibit the work of living artists. A review of this history of activity reveals, however, that in the nearly fifty years before the Pollock gift, there was hardly a major work of new art collected and scarcely an exhibition mounted of a living artist of high stature in the history of modernism. In the 1930s and 1940s the Museum, to its great credit, had been supportive of the exceptional school of Southwestern regionalist painters known as the Dallas Nine. Besides regularly showing their work (and almost every year mounting a major exhibition of new art from all around Texas), the Museum acquired some of it for the collection, most notably in 1945 Alexandre Hogue's *Drouth Stricken Area* (1934), certainly the most important painting to have been created by a member of this distinguished circle of north Texas artists.

Although a few individuals such as Marcus (who also, in 1953, arranged through Neiman-Marcus to commission Rufino Tamayo's monumental mural *El Hombre*) and Elizabeth Blake encouraged the Dallas Museum of Fine Art's interest in ambitious new art, the taste of the institution was quite conservative. (The contemporary interests of Jerry Bywaters, the museum's director from 1943 to 1964 and himself a painter and a member of the Dallas Nine, seem to have run more to architecture, the great Mexicans, and his fellow Texas artists.) The politics, too, of the city were conservative: in 1955, in the heart of the red scare years, civic pressure that was both politically reactionary and aesthetically antimodernist was successfully applied to the Museum's board of trustees to disallow the exhibition or acquisition of work by artists who were known to be communists or communist sympathizers. This state of affairs lasted less than a year before thoughtful and responsible members of the board, with counsel from the American Federation of Arts in New York, were able to reverse a policy so patently at odds with the principle of freedom of expression, but the position of the museum as a place where new art was welcome had been undermined. In 1956, a splinter group of arts leaders founded the Society for Contemporary Arts (renamed in 1957 the Dallas Museum for Contemporary Arts) and in 1959 this small but ambitious organization, under the leadership of Blake, appointed a professional director, Douglas MacAgy. Formerly a curator at the San Francisco Museum of Art (now the San Francisco

Museum of Modern Art), the director of the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute), a special consultant to the director of the Museum of Modern Art, René d'Harnoncourt, and the director of research at Wildenstein & Co., MacAgy began a brief run presenting a lively and substantive exhibition program. Philosophically, culturally, and artistically driven, the exhibitions included the first René Magritte retrospective in America, a group exhibition organized by Katherine Kuh, the well-known contemporary art curator from Chicago, a collaboration with MOMA and the San Francisco Museum of Art on *The Art of Assemblage*, and MacAgy's own shows, *American Genius in Review: I*, which marked the first time that the 1920s-era paintings of Gerald Murphy, the Lost Generation idol, had been shown in public; and *1961*, a survey of the work of thirty-six abstract expressionist and early pop artists, presented in 1962, a memorable part of which was the first showing, outside New York, of Claes Oldenburg's *Store*, and the first museum-sponsored staging of one of Oldenburg's raucous performance pieces or happenings. By late 1962, the DMCA had lost its rent-free quarters and MacAgy's contract had been terminated by the board. Margaret McDermott, the president of the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, with the support of trustees from the museum and from the DMCA, led a controversial effort to merge the two museums, amid general concern that there was insufficient support in the city for more than one to flourish. Harsh words had been said on both sides during the two organizations' independent existence, and strong views continue to be held to this day by some of the veterans. The terms of the merger, which was effected in 1963, included the combination of the full boards of each museum under the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts' name, McDermott's resignation and Bywaters's retirement (both tendered in the greater interest of accommodating the desires of the Contemporary Museum's trustees to have fresh volunteer and professional leadership), and the transfer of the DMCA's modest collection to a foundation that would hold it for the benefit of the new museum. The legacy of the union is an institution in which the dynamic tensions of two agendas, one contemporary and one traditional, still survive. In the years following the merger, the energy and aspirations of a number of those who had been DMCA supporters, a particular example being Betty Marcus, were instrumental to the successes of the new museum. This heritage endures in the enthusiasm for contemporary art that informs the commitment of many of the Museum's current volunteer leaders, who are the source for much of the vision that has fueled the DMA's recent soaring institutional trajectory.

The appointment of Merrill Rueppel as director in 1964 marks the beginning of the Museum's serious development of a contemporary art collection. His own interest in abstract expressionism and his sway with the collector Algur Meadows are the sources of Dallas's very significant holdings in this area. At the same time, James A. Clark was building his extraordinary collection of European abstraction, highlighted by works of Piet Mondrian, Fernand Léger, and Constantin Brancusi, but also including younger artists such as Bridget Riley; much of this collection would come to the DMA by bequest in 1982. Over the decade of Rueppel's directorship he shepherded into the collection works—quite a few of them masterpieces—by Arshile Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, David Smith, Robert Motherwell, Pollock, Mark Rothko, Lee Krasner, Franz Kline, James Brooks, Morris Louis, and Jules Olitski. Many were the gifts of Meadows, and his collection of abstract expressionism developed in partnership with Rueppel was enhanced by a bequest in 1981 that brought additional gifts of paintings by such artists as Richard Diebenkorn, Sam Francis, and Clyfford Still. During the

first half of Rueppel's tenure, exhibitions of the work of Mondrian, Jean Dubuffet, William Bazotes, Mark Tobey, and David Smith were presented. In 1970 Rueppel appointed Robert Murdoch, formerly of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, to be the Museum's first curator of contemporary art, and during their several years of working together the Museum did exhibitions of George Rickey, Burgoyne Diller, Brooks, Sam Francis, and Max Ernst. In 1971, Murdoch very presciently afforded the young Richard Tuttle his first large-scale exhibition in a museum (the legacy of that project lived on in the DMA's presentation in 2006 of the major Tuttle retrospective organized by SFMOMA along with numerous works by the artist that reside in Dallas collections).

The appointment of Harry S. Parker III to the directorship in 1974 signaled that ambitions for the Museum's overall programs, collections, and facilities had grown dramatically. Parker and Murdoch, before the latter moved on in the late 1970s, expanded the scale of the contemporary exhibitions. They showed MOMA's *American Art since 1945* and the Whitney Museum of American Art's *Calder's Universe*, the latter including work the artist had done for Braniff Airlines, which was based in Dallas. They also showed the Meadows Collection, Robert Smithson's drawings, Carl Andre's sculpture, and Oldenburg's *Mouse Museum*, while initiating a *Projects* series with the work of the Dallas artist David McManaway. In 1980 Steven A. Nash joined the DMA staff from the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo. Nash, as deputy director and chief curator, Parker, and Sue Graze, who had been Murdoch's assistant and was named to succeed him, charted the Museum's contemporary course during the exciting years of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the period in which the move from Fair Park to the downtown Arts District was planned. Conferring with the architect Edward Larrabee Barnes, they commissioned Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, Scott Burton, Richard Fleischner, Ellsworth Kelly, and Sol LeWitt to make work to site in the new building and in its exterior courts and sculpture garden. Survey presentations of such well-known artists as William Wiley, Arshile Gorky, Joel Shapiro, Francesco Clemente, and James Surls were accompanied by a very active new series called *Concentrations* that began in 1981, was directed by Graze through the decade, featured shows by respected Texas artists (such as Nic Nicosia and Vernon Fisher), projects by nationally and internationally regarded figures (such as Richard Long), and introductions of promising younger artists (such as Jenny Holzer, Mary Lucier, Peter Fischli and David Weiss, and Kiki Smith). Twenty-five years after its inauguration, *Concentrations* remains an essential element of the DMA's contemporary art program, with some fifty editions (and counting) to its credit. In the new museum, Graze collaborated with Kathy Halbreich, the director of the Vera List Visual Art Center at MIT, to mount a major mid-career survey of the work of Elizabeth Murray in 1987. The museum also presented surveys of the work of Cindy Sherman, Lee Friedlander, and Philip Guston and the Whitney's Donald Judd retrospective, at just about the time that the artist's now internationally renowned Chinati Foundation project in the west Texas town of Marfa was crystallizing. Most ambitiously (and auspiciously), in 1987 Nash organized for the DMA and the National Gallery of Art in Washington a large-scale exhibition of the Raymond and Patsy Nasher Collection, among the handful of the most important holdings of modern sculpture in public or private hands in the world and one of Dallas's greatest cultural assets.

The years between 1974 and 1987 (when both Parker and Nash left the Museum), they, along

with Murdoch and Graze, presided over a significant growth in and broadening of the contemporary collections. Among their acquisitions are important works by Jasper Johns, Mark di Suvero, Richard Serra, Dan Flavin, Alan Saret, Tony Smith, Carl Andre, Cindy Sherman, Robert Rauschenberg, Michael Heizer, and a substantial collection of late twentieth century master prints purchased through the Nancy and Jake Hamon Fund.

In 1988 Richard Brettell, a respected scholar and curator of impressionist and postimpressionist art, was named director of the Museum. Immediately immersing himself in the contemporary program, less than a year after joining the staff he opened—in collaboration with Graze, Charles L. Venable, the curator of decorative arts, and the architect Gary Cunningham—a large-scale, ambitiously installed exhibition entitled *Now/Then/Again: Contemporary Art in Dallas, 1949–1989*, which showcased the DMA's holdings at the same time as the catalogue specifically pointed out what Brettell regarded as their lacunae. A highlight was the Museum's new acquisition, Chris Burden's *All the Submarines of the United States of America* (1987).

Graze resigned in 1990 and the following year Brettell appointed as her successor Annegreth Nill, formerly of the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh. Brettell left the Museum in 1992 to be succeeded in 1993 by Jay Gates. Nill retooled the *Concentrations* series into *Encounters*, a concept that, over its six-chapter life, paired internationally known artists with counterparts from Texas, for instance, Damien Hirst and Tracy Hicks, and Cady Noland and Doug MacWithey, collaborated with the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth to bring the Walker Art Center's *Photography in Contemporary German Art* to north Texas, showed the Albright-Knox's Susan Rothenberg survey and an installation that Jenny Holzer created for the American pavilion at the Venice *Biennale*, and acquired work by Christopher Wool, Georg Herold, David Hammons, and Anish Kapoor. Gates took a personal interest in the presentation of *Dale Chihuly: Installations, 1964–94* and in the commissioning of the artist's *Hart Window* for the Hamon Atrium.

Nill stepped down in 1995 and, in 1996, Gates invited Charles Wylie from the Saint Louis Art Museum and Suzanne Weaver from the Indianapolis Museum of Art to join the staff as, respectively, the newly endowed Lupe Murchison Curator of Contemporary Art and the assistant curator of contemporary art. (Weaver was subsequently promoted and her position has recently been endowed as the Nancy and Tim Hanley Associate Curator of Contemporary Art.) Highlights of their accomplishments before Gates resigned the directorship in 1998 include the revitalization under Weaver's direction of the *Concentrations* series to feature such artists as Mariko Mori, Patrick Faulhaber, and Anne Chu, Wylie's undertaking of the organization of a major traveling exhibition of the recent paintings of Brice Marden, their commissioning of Tatsuo Miyajima to make a new work specifically for the DMA, and their purchase of Bill Viola's *The Crossing* and works by Mona Hatoum, Jim Hodges, and Rosemarie Trockel.

Although several collectors friendly to the DMA were active in the 1980s, notably Rosalie Taubman and Jessie and Charles Price, it was in the 1990s that the wider art world became alert to a great florescence of activity as Howard Rachofsky and Marguerite and Robert Hoff man built their now internationally renowned collections. The Rachofsky House,

designed by Richard Meier, was completed in 1996 and assumed a semipublic role in the cultural life of Dallas as a venue for philanthropic and educational events and rotating presentations of the Rachofsky Collection, which, with the collaboration of Allan Schwartzman, the collection director, was quite clearly growing far more rapidly and adventurously than the Museum's own collection and was consciously considered by Rachofsky as a complementary (but not competitive) resource for the community, one that could be, in its nature, more dynamic and edgy than the Museum. To different degrees—depending on whose opinion is being solicited—underlying the situation was a sense, among collectors in Dallas, of pent-up frustration with the limits of the perceived capacity of the Museum to program and collect vigorously in the contemporary art arena.

In the fall of 1998, when the Museum's trustees were looking for a new director and the search committee and I were in discussions, the following conditions seemed to pertain. Dallas had one of the most active and informed communities of private collectors of contemporary art (by this time also prominently including Gayle and Paul Stoffel, Deedie Rose, and Nancy and Tim Hanley) and most of the collectors were supportively aligned with the Dallas Museum of Art and vocally keen for it to work at a level of ambition and vitality commensurate with other well-versed, committed museums across the country. They hoped (and this part was good for me) that their next museum director would be conversant and engaged with contemporary art, hopes that, thanks to my experiences at the Carnegie and SFMOMA, I could fulfill. The recent decision of Raymond Nasher to locate the new home for his renowned modern sculpture collection next door to the DMA's own significant modern and contemporary collections would, in short order, effect a synergy that would make Dallas an exceptionally interesting international art destination (that the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth was simultaneously going forward with a major, new building designed by Tadao Ando added further to the attractiveness of metropolitan north Texas). One could make from a reading of the institutional history an excellent case for the existence of a mandate, based on the fifty-year-old legacy of the DMCA, for the Museum to pursue—within the context of an encyclopedic museum—a modern and contemporary art program, encompassing the century and a half from realism and impressionism, through classical modernism and abstract expressionism and up to the present, which would be calibrated in its scale to balance with the level of program activity dedicated to the historical and culturally diverse aspects of the collection. Against that background, the future of the Museum was clearly exciting.

Marguerite Hoffman had been a member of the Museum's staff in the late 1980s and was acutely aware of the institutional paralysis that sets in when resources to support adventurous programming are so difficult to identify that the development of creative ideas atrophies. She urged her husband Robert to come see me shortly after I assumed the duties of the directorship in early 1999. He asked how the Museum might advance its contemporary activity if a significant amount of new funding, committed over a multiyear time frame, were to be made available for incremental exhibitions, publications, education, and acquisitions. I replied that I thought we could jump-start the program and sustain it at a level that would be well regarded in the art world and that the Dallas supporters could take pride in. Wylie, Weaver, and I set to dreaming and planning, and the Hoffmans, with the help of the Rachofskys and Deedie Rose, drew together a circle of supporters to fund the Contemporary

Art Initiative. At about the same time, Anne Livet, a Texan living in New York, and Deedie Rose conceived of a partnership between the DMA and the American Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR) with the idea of collaborating on an art auction benefit in which the organizing effort and the proceeds would be shared by the two organizations. Cindy and Howard Rachofsky enthusiastically assumed responsibility for hosting the first *2 x 2 for AIDS and Art*, which was successfully staged at the Rachofsky House in 1999; it has since become the most prestigious annual event on the Dallas philanthropic social calendar and the largest source of funding for the Museum's contemporary art acquisitions program. These new resources allowed the Museum to triple its contemporary pursuits without diminishing in the least its dedication to the more traditional aspects of its programming. Growth in the exhibitions schedule and the collection put a great deal of pressure on the spaces available for the presentation of contemporary art, which led to the temporary deinstallation in 2002 of the Oldenburg-Van Bruggen *Stake Hitch*, a large-scale, site-specific sculpture that was a popular Barrel Vault fixture for nearly twenty years. The newly available, architecturally distinguished space, with its accompanying, perfectly proportioned Quadrant Galleries (subsequently named for the Rachofskys, the Stoffels, the Hanleys, and Mary Noel and Bill Lamont), became the site of ambitious installations by artists, first Sigmar Polke (an exhibition that traveled to Tate Modern in London) and then Ellsworth Kelly, Lothar Baumgarten, Robert Ryman, and Richard Tuttle. Further enhancing the contemporary art spaces, Gluckman Mayner Architects in 2004 handsomely renovated the contemporary galleries at the south end of the Concourse, which were subsequently named the Marguerite and Robert Hoffman Galleries.

Major retrospectives of the work of Thomas Struth (organized by Wylie, the exhibition then traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York), Wolfgang Laib, Nicosia, Robert Smithson, and William Eggleston have been presented and, with the particular cooperation of collectors in Dallas, the Museum began actively leveraging the art resources in the community. As a result, the DMA has been able to organize exhibitions and secure traveling shows of works by Jasper Johns, Gerhard Richter, Joseph Beuys and Félix González-Torres, Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Kelly, Ryman, and Peter Doig. Dorothy Kosinski, the Senior Curator of Painting and Sculpture and the Barbara Thomas Lemmon Curator of European Art, drew deeply on the Hoffman Collection's Duchamp, Cornell, and Johns holdings to organize *Dialogues*, which brought those artists' work together with that of Rauschenberg, including the DMA's monumental *Skyway*. Weaver pushed the *Concentrations* series to a new level of ambition and experimentation in offering solo exhibitions to leading younger artists, such as Doug Aitken, Shirin Neshat, Matthew Ritchie, Jane and Louise Wilson, John Pomara, Anri Sala, Maureen Gallace, Matthew Buckingham, Jim Lambie, and Charline von Heyl; these exhibitions are frequently either the artists' first in a museum or a world premier of their newest work.

For the Museum's centennial in 2003, Weaver co-curated with Lane Relyea *Come Forward: Emerging Art in Texas*, a selection of fresh Lone Star talent that reaffirmed the DMA's one-hundred-year commitment to the art and artists of its region. Also for the centennial, Kosinski, Wylie, and Weaver organized *Celebrating Sculpture*, an exhibition that welcomed

the DMA's new neighbor, the Nasher Sculpture Center, to the Dallas Arts District. (Steven Nash, who returned to Dallas after fifteen years at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, was named the first director of the Center.) By drawing on loans from the community and the DMA's collection, paired with riches of the Nasher Collection next door, this exhibition showed off the city's great depth in modern and contemporary sculpture.

Augmented resources allowed the Museum to have a considerably larger presence in the contemporary art market, making possible such major acquisitions as the complete multiples of Richter, major paintings by Anselm Kiefer, Polke, and Richter, and important sculptures by Matthew Barney, Barry Le Va, Bruce Nauman, Charles Ray, and Robert Smithson, while still permitting the regular purchase of works by less established and younger artists.

In 2001, the Rachofskys donated nineteen important works of contemporary art, by far the largest gift of its kind that the Museum had received since the Meadows contributions a couple of decades earlier. Very happily for the institution, their generosity was not singular; the past several years have seen a new and (in Dallas's history) unprecedented beneficence on the part of the collecting community, which has resulted in the conspicuous enrichment of the Museum's collection.

The grand, utterly transforming moment came in 2005 when the Hoffmans, Rachofskys, and Roses joined to commit to the Museum by irrevocable bequest their entire collections, amounting to nearly nine hundred works (with future acquisitions to be included, as well). The circumstances of this gift are described from each participant's perspective in the interviews that follow in this catalogue but, it hardly needs to be said, the fortunes of the DMA as a center for postwar and contemporary art were so dramatically improved that the Museum could claim a new, eminent position in the global community of institutions with collections in this field. We pause now to celebrate the particularly salubrious circumstances that pertain at this moment in Dallas with María de Corral's *Fast Forward: Contemporary Collections for the Dallas Museum of Art*, an exhibition made possible by the thriving, collaborative collecting environment, driven by the shared curiosity to see how it all looks and works together and informed by an underlying aspiration to move the institution forward dramatically in the area of contemporary art through the implementation of innovative strategies representing a way of collection development that is unique to Dallas.

The principal resources for information on the history of the Museum are: Jerry Bywaters, *Seventy-five Years of Art in Dallas* (Dallas, Tex.: Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, 1978), David Beasley, *Douglas MacAgy and the Foundations of Modern Art Curatorship* (Simco, Ontario: Davus Publishing, 1998), Dorothy Kosinski, *Dallas Museum of Art: 100 Years* (Dallas, Tex.: Dallas Museum of Art, 2003), DMA annual reports, the Dallas Museum of Art Archives and additional published resources held in the Mildred R. and Frederick M. Mayer Library.

Essay from *Fast forward: contemporary collections for the Dallas Museum of Art* / edited by María de Corral and John R. Lane ; with contributions by Frances Colpitt, María de Corral, John R. Lane, Mark Rosenthal, Allan Schwartzman, and Charles Wylie. [Dallas, Tex.] : Dallas Museum of Art ; New Haven : Yale University Press, 2007.