

Collecting: Marciano Art Foundation

Opening its new museum in an iconic modernist Masonic Temple on Wilshire Boulevard, the Marciano Art Foundation prepares for its much-anticipated debut.

By **art ltd.** · May 1, 2017



Marciano Art Foundation exterior view

The guessing will soon be over. The oft-speculated and little-known private collection of Maurice and Paul Marciano, the two brothers at the helm of mega-denim label GUESS, is installed in its new home in Los Angeles on Wilshire Boulevard, and preparing to open to the public on May 25. Housed in a converted Scottish Rite Masonic Temple, originally designed by Millard Sheets in the late 1950s and adapted for the Foundation by Kulapat Yantrasast of WHY Architecture, the collection is massive, and its contents, until very recently, a relative mystery.

Art collections, ranging from personally motivated to indifferently amassed, can take on any kind of quality, the most interesting of which being the intimate revelations of the personal. An unlikely catalyst in acquisitions made by public institutions with museological objectives, private ones tend to betray some shadow of psychological disposition, reflecting at the very least the tastes of its gatherers, or, at the most, exposing something sublimated and pathological behind the desire to accumulate. Whether Maurice and Paul Marciano's collection, now exhibited publicly under the aegis of The Marciano Art Foundation, can be said to evince intimacy is unlikely. But with 1,500 individual pieces by 200 artists in its monumental, newly refurbished 110,000 square-foot home—a space larger than the Broad Museum—its sheer size reveals something of its founders' insatiable appetites for procuring art. Perhaps the sizable collection can be said, if nothing else, to manifest something of its makers' desire and conviction in the currency of the contemporary.



"All-seeing Keyhole Eye," 2013, Jim Shaw
 Acrylic on muslin, 32" x 22"
 Photo: Joshua White/JWPictures.com
 Courtesy: the artist and Blum & Poe

The story of the Marciano brothers' collection begins with a false start. A lukewarm interest, it seems, led them to purchase some historical Impressionist and Post-Impressionist works in the 1980s, followed by the sale of those few acquisitions and a 15-year halt in their activity. The Foundation's current collection holdings were accumulated in earnest over a decade, beginning in 2007, and include only contemporary works created from 1990 onwards, with an emphasis on Los Angeles-based artists. Thus, the collection can be said to be young in every sense of the word; procured in a relatively brief period, all of a decade, and restricted to a very recent term, the accelerated collection presents a very focused, albeit condensed, cross-section of work. Among the most thoroughly represented of its 200 artists are such seminal LA figures as Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley, Sterling Ruby, and Mark Grotjahn, and younger LA artists like Analia Saban and Kaari Upson, as well an eclectic and heterogeneous array of well-known American and international artists such as Rudolf Stingel, Albert Oehlen, Christopher Wool, Glenn Ligon, Rashid Johnson, Louise Lawler, Jacqueline Humphries, Gabriel Orozco and Wolfgang Tillmans.

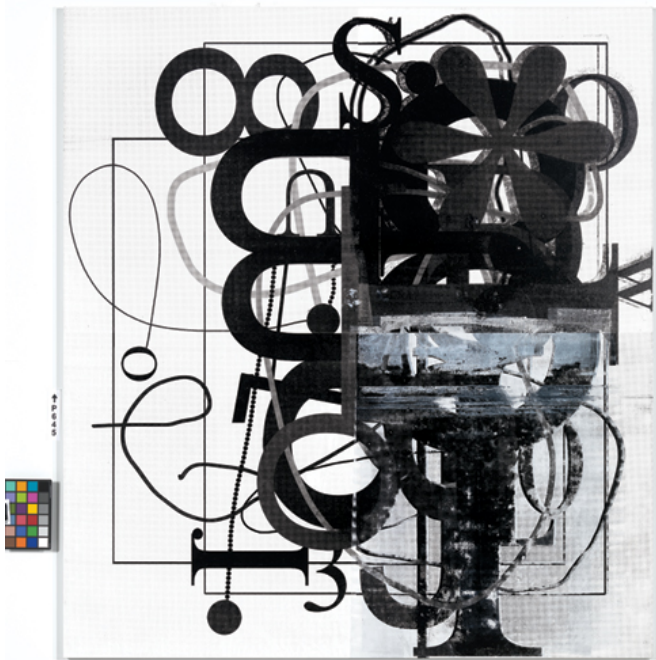
Jamie Goldblatt Manné, the Foundation's Director, has been managing the Marciano Collection for the past seven years—almost the entirety of the collection's lifespan. According to Manné, "The Collection truly represents Maurice and Paul's aesthetic tastes and conceptual interests. Works are acquired based on several criteria, including the collection's commitment to the artists collected in depth. Curatorial recognition, market positioning, and the relationship the work has to the collection (Does it fit in well with any of the major themes in the collection? And do we see ourselves collecting this artist in depth?), are also factors."



"Tannhäuser," 2013, Latifa Echakhch. Installation: backdrop of opera decors including wooden floor, 6 MDF modules, 6 spotlights, and 3 harps, 158 1/8" x 662 5/8" x 313"
 Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography. Courtesy: Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich

Manné goes on to identify some of its guiding thematic axes. Among the most prevalent is “mediated abstraction,” understood as an impulse towards process and self-referential materiality in abstract works that are minimally reliant on painting. Examples of which include works by artists such as Mark Bradford, who creates beautifully complex collages, and Kelley Walker, known for his incorporation of digital content and print media. Both create works that can be read perfunctorily as painting at a glance but whose material practice interrupts any exclusive reliance on paint.

Manné goes on to explain, “Other themes in the collection look at appropriation and institutional critique, as in works by Richard Prince, Sherrie Levine, Barbara Kruger, and Louise Lawler. We have artists exploring Neo-Povera like Sergej Jensen, Theaster Gates, Oscar Tuazon, Carol Bove, Gedi Sibony, and Analia Saban. Also represented are works dealing with the post-human, from Mike Kelley, Raymond Pettibon, Mai-Thu Perret, Jim Shaw, George Condo, Gillian Wearing; the contemporary sublime, like Ugo Rondinone, Olafur Eliasson, Gerhard Richter, Anish Kapoor, Trisha Donnelly, and Friedrich Kunath. There are also works dealing with technology and graphic media at the intersection of art, like Ed Ruscha, Rob Pruitt, Alex Israel, Cory Arcangel, Mark Leckey, and Michael Williams; and performance and instruction-based practices, represented by Doug Aitken, Paul McCarthy, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Philippe Parreno, and Charles Gaines. The collection also includes photography by the likes of Thomas Demand, Wolfgang Tillmans, Catherine Opie, Andreas Gursky, and Roe Ethridge; and pieces exploring identity politics, including works by Danh Vo, Rashid Johnson, Glenn Ligon, Sam Durant, Latifa Echakhch, Zhang Huan, Goshka Macuga, and Yael Bartana.”



“Untitled,” 2014
Christopher Wool
Silkscreen ink and enamel on linen
106” x 96”
Photo: courtesy the artist

Though undoubtedly extensive, the collection is still an active work-in-progress. Manné says the Foundation acquires hundreds of works a year and will continue to do so in its new home. When asked if the nature of the collection was likely to change, given its less prohibitive spatial parameters, she offered, “The Collection is collecting on a consistent basis at all times. The direction may change based on our new home (i.e. we can now house more non-domestic works, etc.); however, the spirit will remain consistent.”

The building, a worthy subject of fascination in and of itself, is a constant ghost in the presentation of and interface with this contemporary work. The remodel has closely followed the original footprint of the 1961 building, and the exterior façades, which include impressive mosaics by the designer and architect Millard Sheets, have been preserved and restored. The building’s mysterious past, a secretive Masonic order bordering on the occult, continues to ebb into the present incarnation of the space. An entire room of wigs was found in the building’s recesses upon purchase, as a case in point of its strangeness. Additional features of the building include the conversion of a large 1,800-seat theater, transformed into an exhibition space capable of accommodating huge works and installations. As a living reminder of this weird past, the Foundation also includes a “relic room” curated by Bard professor Susan L. Aberth, containing some of the items left behind by the covert order.

The Marciano Art Foundation plans to offer more than just a fixed, eponymously named collection and intends to disrupt the monological curatorial vantage point typical of this format. Its programming has lofty ambitions and aims to function as a dynamic resource for both curatorial inquiry and the commissioning of new artworks, to be exhibited in a designated project area. Manné describes the curatorial program the Foundation intends to implement: “We do not want the Foundation to be static or represent only one viewpoint, which is why we have chosen to work with visiting, guest curators. The Collection is not only deep but very broad as well, and we want to make sure that the various viewpoints and perspectives within the collection are given equal attention and consideration. Visiting curators will have unfettered access to the collection and will also be encouraged, at times, to complement collection holdings with borrowed works from other sources.”

The first external, third-party activation of the Collection comes by way of Swiss-born curator Philipp Kaiser, current curator of the Public sector at Art Basel, Miami, and former senior curator at MoCA. “UNPACKING,” his inaugural exhibition for the Foundation, will feature only 100 works drawn from the vast supply afforded by the collection. Based on a Walter Benjamin essay discussing the concept of productive chaos in the physical activity of unpacking, the exhibition explores the ways in which disorder can re-contextualize objects. Manné explains, “‘UNPACKING’ showcases the breadth and depth of the collection while simultaneously creating a loose order where a multitude of meanings collide with site responsiveness to give visibility to unpredictable connections within the fray.” The first presentation will also include a site-specific exhibition of new works, “The Wig Museum,” by Los Angeles-based artist Jim Shaw, in which the artist incorporates found objects from the site. “Consistent with Shaw’s iconic practice of appropriating found images and objects,” says Manné, “guest curator Philipp Kaiser encouraged the artist to consider these enigmatic artifacts as a starting point, including the Freemasons’ monumental theatrical backdrops.”

While the Marciano Art Foundation’s collection may not be particularly revelatory in terms of its authors as individuals, it does reveal a longing to possess a huge piece of contemporary cultural real estate. It also attests to a desire to support and participate in that cultural foothold, in the midst of its moment of relevance, while it’s happening. With the notable success of the Broad Museum Downtown, it has become clear that the model is a viable one, and that popular audiences are open and even eager to engaging with contemporary art in a stimulating new setting. The Foundation’s public largesse is a great gift to the city, especially as it’s intended to support active culture and provide a platform and conduit for its production. A collector can hoard and withhold or can bestow and share; in sharing their substantial collection with the public in such a visible way, the Marcianos’ gift is clearly offered in the spirit of generosity, and promises to expand the city’s map with another worthy cultural destination.

—MARIEKE TREILHARD

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