# MET BREUER

*With high regard for the past, The Met makes a play for the future of contemporary art.*

*by* **CAROL KINO**

The Met Breuer by night
*photo by* ED LEDERMAN

Andy Warhol
*Do It Yourself* (*Violin*)
Private collection
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*Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible*
The Met Breuer (2016)

The Met Breuer exterior
*photo by* ED LEDERMAN

It's a brilliant winter day and Sheena Wagstaff, the chair of the modern and contemporary art department at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, is welcoming me into her office, a book-stacked aerie overlooking Central Park. We're here to discuss the moment when the museum will unveil its long-awaited contemporary program, to be housed in a Madison Avenue building designed by Marcel Breuer, which from 1966 until recently was the home of a different institution, the Whitney Museum of American Art.

I ask Wagstaff if she feels that in forming her department, which she was hired to do four years ago, and using the Breuer building as its flagship, she is coming up against ghosts. After all, contemporary art has always seemed an afterthought for the Metropolitan: before her arrival it was overseen for years by the same department that handled eighteenth-century painting. And the Breuer building, from the moment it opened, with a glittering ceremony attended by Jacqueline Kennedy, has always been linked to the Whitney and American art and the self-defining struggles of both. Of course, the Whitney reinvented itself last May by moving to a much larger space downtown.

Wagstaff, a cool and savvy Englishwoman who was previously chief curator of London's Tate Modern, has fielded such questions for months now, and she dispatches this one with efficiency and verve. "Actually it's the opposite," she says, then launches into an impassioned discussion of Henry Geldzahler, the legendary curator who established the Met's first contemporary art department in 1967. "For a curator in those days, Geldzahler was incredibly unusual, because his life revolved around artists," she notes, pointing out that, as well as championing young, underknown artists—which Geldzahler famously did until his death in 1994—he'd also hung out with some of the hottest, participating in Claes Oldenburg's happenings and, as a habitué of the Factory, even acting in an Andy Warhol film.

In 1969, Geldzahler put the Met on the downtown map with the show *New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970*. Organized for the Met's centennial, it included work by Warhol, Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, and Robert Rauschenberg, among others. "That was a brilliant vision to found this department and to build on," Wagstaff says.

This idyllic era of focusing on the art of "now" was brief—after Geldzahler left the museum in 1977, he was briefly succeeded by Thomas B. Hess, who championed the abstract expressionists.

William Lieberman, chairman of the modern art department until his death in 2005, snagged some great bequests, like the Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection, rich in twentieth century School of Paris paintings by Picasso, Matisse, and others; and the Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman Collection of modern masterworks, by the likes of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. Then came Gary Tinterow, now director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, who exhibited a penchant for monographic exhibitions of such giants as Francis Bacon and John Baldessari.

As for the Whitney's former home, however, "I can answer that easily," Wagstaff says, of its ghost potential: "None. The Whitney has taken all of its history downtown with it. We're not interring the body." Instead she prefers to view the iconic structure, which Breuer described as "an inverted pyramid," and she describes as "so full of texture, so full of color," as an artwork itself. Indeed, the building has been lovingly refurbished for the opening and its inaugural exhibition will deal with Breuer's work.

In the eyes of most New Yorkers and museum aficionados, however, the Whitney does leave a trail of spirits, most notably that of its founder, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, an heiress-artist who established it in 1914 in her Greenwich Village atelier as the Whitney Studio, aiming to provide a gathering spot for artists and to promote

**"Our visitors have always been intrigued by the interconnected path they can travel at the Met—both cross-cultural and intergenerational, spanning over 5,000 years. To end that journey in the mid-twentieth century would be unfair to our audience."**

the cause of American art, then very much the struggling underdog. Whitney, who also collected, finally opened a museum in 1931, after ironically she'd offered her holdings to the Metropolitan and had been refused. Only after her death in 1942, with the rise of abstract expressionism and American pop, did her little institution and American art alike finally come into their own.

Because of the Whitney's origins as a studio club, still expressed in traditions like the Biennial and its engagement with ultra-contemporary work, it is still known as "the artists' museum." And it is the spirit of that history, perhaps more than anything else, that the Met Breuer program seeks to continue. As Wagstaff puts it, "The Whitney leaves that tradition within the Breuer building of working with living artists."

Indeed, rather than the updated, donor-friendly version of the Tinterow model that many had expected—major surveys of blue-chip demigods, like James Turrell and Cindy Sherman, or younger talents favored by A-list collectors, like Kehinde Wiley and Julie Mehretu—the Met Breuer's first solo survey, organized by Wagstaff herself, is focusing on a true artist's artist: the little-known Indian modernist Nasreen Mohamedi (see sidebar).

On view through September 4, *Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible* seeks to address creativity in another fashion. A grand historical survey of more than 190 works spanning nearly six centuries, it uses work by the likes of Da Vinci, Rembrandt, Picasso, Alice Neel, the Brazilian neo-concretist Hélio Oiticica, and the New York contemporary sculptor Janine Antoni to link the Renaissance notion of *non finito*, an unfinished aesthetic, to modern-day conceptual concerns. Here, the catalog includes interviews with artists like Vija Celmins and Luc Tuymans, discussing the moment of creative flux in the studio that might lead one to call a work complete—or not.

It's a compelling idea. And aesthetically, one of the show's most fascinating aspects was the degree to which unfinished work, whatever the era, can look radically contemporary—like a faceless portrait of an eighteenth-century Spanish duchess by German painter Anton Raphael Mengs that suggested a work by the surrealist Leonor Fini, or a fanciful Baldessari. Yet seen in the Breuer building—whose brashness and unorthodoxy one can't help associating with the expansive, forward-looking march of early American art—the exhibition made it clear that this museum would be charting a dramatically different course.

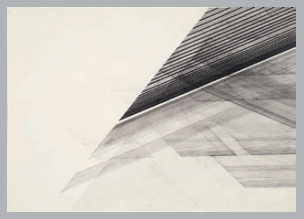
Wagstaff, speaking after the opening, says it was essential to establish the Met Breuer in this way because it lays important groundwork for future shows. "*Unfinished* starts in the Renaissance," she says, with a 1437 drawing of a church by Jan van Eyck, and takes the audience through several important "hinges," as she puts it, that shaped modern Western art history: the middle of the nineteenth century and the beginning and middle of the twentieth. "I hope that when visitors and artists return to the Breuer in the future they will remember that trajectory," she says.

The show represents a new direction for the Met in another sense, too, because it was organized collaboratively by six different departments, including American art, European sculpture and decorative arts, conservation, and drawings and prints. "This is an experimental departure for us," says one co-organizer, Andrea Bayer, of the European paintings department. Although it originated as two separate exhibitions, one looking at modern art, the other at Renaissance and baroque painting, the two were brought together—for the opening—as part of an increasing push at the Met to organize more cross-departmental exhibitions.

"From the beginning," Bayer says, "Sheena wanted this to be about living artists, to move outside the institution into the artist's studio." Another aim, says another co-organizer, Kelly Baum, a curator of postwar and contemporary art, is to "create an art-historical context for modern and contemporary art. It allows us to think about modern and contemporary art through the lens of history, but it allows us to think about history through the lens of modern and contemporary art." It functions, she continues, "like a telescoping of history."

Upcoming shows at the Met Breuer will also link the present with the past. In October, it will open the first retrospective of Kerry James Marshall, known for presenting from past and present-day African American life, inspired by old master paintings; he has referred to himself as a "history painter." It will be accompanied by about forty works selected by Marshall from the museum's holdings: African tribal masks and oracle figures, Albrecht Dürer and Japanese Edo period prints, a photograph by Stan Douglas, and the Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres painting *Odalisque in Grisaille* (ca. 1824-34)—pieces that are all "touchstones for Kerry in his





All works by NASREEN MOHAMEDI

*Untitled* (ca. 1970),
Gelatin silver print, Private Collection

*Untitled* (1960s),
Ink on paper, Estate of Nasreen Mohamedi / Courtesy of Talwar Gallery, New York / New Delhi

*Untitled* (ca. 1975),
Ink and graphite on paper, Sikander and Hydari Collection

*Untitled* (1969),
Collage and watercolor on paper, Collection of Gayatri and Priyam Jhaveri

## Nasreen Mohamedi

*by* CAROL KINO

Born in 1937 in Karachi and educated in London, Nasreen Mohamedi is one of the rare abstractionists—and female artists—to have emerged from post-independence India. She spent much of her career teaching there and died at fifty-three from a variant of Huntington's Disease. Her grid-and-line-based abstractions, made with ink and graphite, meticulously marked until the bitter end, have rarely been exhibited in this country and have only recently become known in Europe. Her photographs—closely cropped images of paving stones, Islamic buildings, and weavings stretched across looms—were never shown publicly in her short lifetime.

Mohamedi may not be the sort of headliner who creates a stir in the auction room, but she offers precisely the kind of creative and intellectual riches that are craved by artists and critics. I first heard about her work from the South African artist William Kentridge, who discovered the artist on his first trip to India in 2013. We were speaking for a column I used to write for *T magazine* about little-known artists that well-known artists find inspiring.

"Seeing Mohamedi's work was kind of a revelation," he said. "I was more familiar with the figurative Indian tradition. I hadn't expected to see work like that there at all...The purity of modernism gets a fantastic taint and impurity when it's made in the third world."

He also described her as "exceeding the cool of Agnes Martin" and added, "I think it's a sobering lesson for people to see her drawings and understand where Agnes Martin comes from, rather than thinking of it the other way around."

The inaugural Met Breuer exhibition was organized by three institutions, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid and the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art in New Delhi, as well as the Met. However, Met curator Sheena Wagstaff arranged this installation using the open grid of Breuer's concrete coffered ceiling to enhance the underlying rhythms of the work.

The drawings are displayed on pale gray walls aligned with the east-west axis of that grid, and the photographs on slightly darker walls aligned with the north-south. This underlines the serene sense of order Mohamedi must have struggled toward throughout her life, helping us follow the thread as her work morphs from brushy portraits and landscapes to finely inked drawings of fibers on a loom, and then into planes of lines that seem to levitate and crackle across the paper.

"Her work really speaks to this essentialist approach to art-making," says Wagstaff, "which really takes you back to that moment of putting a mark on paper, one of the most difficult things in the world to do."

The show was also filled with Mohamedi's diaries and notes. Walking through it, one sensed what many artists must grapple with as they fuse their own impulses with the global and local. The catalog quotes a diary entry from 1968:

*1975—Grids to Labyrinths*
*Labyrinths, lines among lines—*
*A mesh*
*Difficult to destroy*
*Yet one must*
*Walk*
*Nothing more*
*Out of chaos, form—silence.*

artistic life," says Ian Alteveer, associate curator in the Modern and Contemporary Art department.

Although the exhibition will have two other venues—the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles—this will be the only one to present Marshall's work in an art-historical context. "It's something only we can do," Alteveer says. "I see it as part of our grand tradition of great monographic retrospectives, but also as a manifestation of our really exciting new emphasis on contemporary art and its embrocation with art history."

If you look a bit more closely, it's clear that this sort of overlap isn't only taking place at the Met Breuer; it is actually going on all over the museum. And it has been escalating since Wagstaff's boss, Thomas Campbell, assumed his role as director in January 2009.

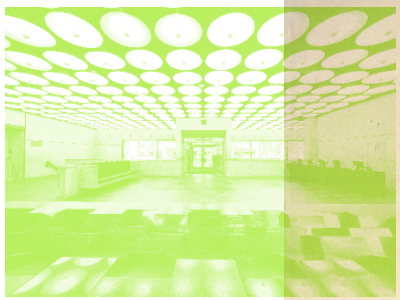
Campbell, formerly a curator in the department of European sculpture and decorative arts, had already exhibited a flair for bringing the past to life. After arriving at the Met from London's Franses Tapestry Archive, he impressed everyone—critics and museum leadership alike—by organizing an exhibition of Renaissance tapestry in 2002 that turned out to be a huge hit.

When Campbell succeeded Philippe de Montebello, the French aristocrat who'd helmed the Met for thirty-one years without exhibiting much interest in contemporary art, he felt change was imperative. "I came into my directorship knowing that the Met must embrace the full sweep of art history, including the art of our own time," he tells me in an email. "Our visitors have always been intrigued by the interconnected path they can travel at the Met—both cross-cultural and intergenerational, spanning over 5,000 years. To end that journey in the mid-twentieth century would be unfair to our audience."

One early step was to transform the concerts and lectures department into a berth for performance art, helmed since 2011 by Limor Tomer, formerly an adjunct performing arts curator at the Whitney. When she was hired, Tomer recalls, Campbell asked her "'to think about what role performance could play in a museum like the Met.' He says all art was once new and contemporary." Introducing performance into the galleries, they decided, would help bring them to life.

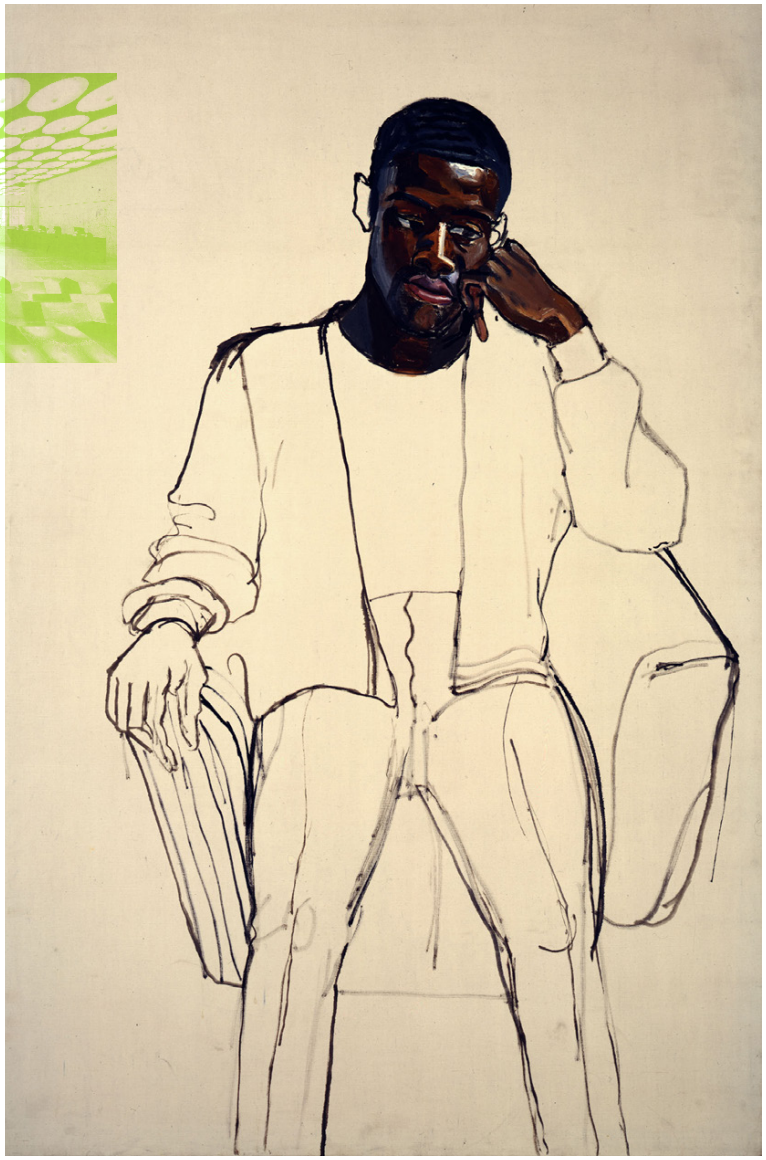
She began by staging two works involving the composer Tan Dun, best known for his Academy Award-winning score for the 2000 film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*: a performance that sent dancers through the American wing's sculpture court and an abridged version of *The Peony Pavilion*, a 1598 Chinese play later re-imagined as an opera, performed in the Astor Chinese Garden Court. The same year, the experimental hip-hop artist D. J. Spooky That Subliminal Kid became the Met's first performance artist-in-residence. The latest artist to hold that position is the composer Vijay Iyer, who performed in the Met Breuer's lobby gallery throughout its opening month.

Other recent commissions have included *La Celestina*, a video installation by London's ERRATICA opera company that put shadow



The Met Breuer lobby
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016

AUGUSTE RODIN, *The Hand of God*
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Edward D. Adams, 1908



ALICE NEEL, *James Hunter Black Draftee*
COMMA Foundation, Belgium
© The Estate of Alice Neel, 1965

## Sonic Blossom

*by* KELLY ROGERS

**Among the eleven classically trained vocalists to perform for Lee Mingwei's *Sonic Blossom* (2015) was Tookah Sapper, an Oklahoma City native and Manhattan School of Music Master's degree candidate. In an exploration of intimate human connection, Lee's interactive installation brought the transformative gift of music to Metropolitan Museum of Art guests through Sapper's, and others—vocal musical talents.**

**"There was something visceral that people felt from the music and our voices," Sapper says. "When performing in a theater on a stage, there is a separation between the singer and the audience. Everything that I give in that kind of performance, I do not get back from the audience right away... In this setting however, everything that I gave to the person I was singing to, I got back immediately. Working with Lee Mingwei was an unforgettable experience... the love that he brings to this piece was felt by everyone of us who sang."**

PABLO PICASSO, *Carafe and Candlestick*
The Leonard A. Lauder Cubist Collection © 2015 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

puppets in the Met's sixteenth century Spanish courtyard and Reid Farrington's *The Return*, featuring a motion-capture avatar based on Tullio Lombardo's fifteenth-century sculpture of Adam, which was shattered in 2002 and restored in 2014.

In October, the Met staged Lee Mingwei's *Sonic Blossom*, which involved singers performing Schubert lieder for individual visitors in the contemporary and Asian art galleries. It won rapturous reviews: James R. Oestreich, writing in the *New York Times*, called the performances "intense and powerful" and said he had been "moved to tears." For Lee, who'd created the work for the Mori Art Museum in Japan, having it staged at the Met was the fulfillment of a long-held fantasy. "It is my favorite museum to visit," Lee says. "I usually go there every other week and immerse myself—not in contemporary art, but in historical art, from European painting to African and East Asian artifacts. I find the most amazing surprises there. And I had often thought about what I would do if I were invited to do a project at the Met, as a contemporary artist."

The Met's other secret: some of its most devoted attendees are artists, who visit regularly for information and inspiration both. So while it has a range of public initiatives underway—like a planned modern and contemporary wing designed by the British architect David Chipperfield—some of its most interesting initiatives are subtler and quieter and directly address the way that living artists relate to the collection.

One of the most resonant is the Artist Project, a year-old web series that features artists talking about objects in the collection that have inspired them. Subtitled "What artists see when they look at the Met," it can be found at artistproject.metmuseum.org. Visit it, and you can see Kerry James Marshall analyzing that Ingres odalisque (he calls the grayscale image "ultra-modern" and "conceptual") or the French nouveau réaliste Jacques Villeglé, whose collages of multilayered, ripped posters presaged pop, speaking eloquently of his World War II boyhood discovery of Picasso and Braque. The Brooklyn street artist Swoon is equally moving on the subject of Honoré Daumier's *The Third-Class Carriage*, an unfinished oil painting (ca. 1862-64) that depicts an old woman, a sleeping boy and a nursing mother in a crowded railway car. She calls him a "relentless social observer" and says of the picture, "when I see this painting, it just strikes the flint. I try to walk in those footsteps."

Many speak of art in the collection that has been a source for their own work, like the conceptualist Nina Katchadourian, who deftly analyzes the fifteenth-century Flemish portraits that inspired her long-running cellphone project *Seat Assignment* (which began when she shot some selfies to entertain herself on a long flight, and suddenly had the urge to transform herself into a faux Hans Memling).

Others choose work they know little about, like Jeffrey Gibson, whose paintings and sculptures mix Native American tradition with modernist abstraction. Asked to participate in the project after he'd given a visitor tour of nineteenth-century American Western bronzes, Gibson (whose own background is Choctaw and Cherokee) chose slit gongs from the Vanuatu archipelago. But that's part of the Met's appeal, he says: "It's like wandering through a book. The experience of going there really has more influence over me than reading contemporary criticism or looking at contemporary art." When he was younger and unsure of his direction, "I would go there when I needed to feel I was in the lineage of the practice," Gibson says. "I used to walk through the Met and feel as though these were my heroes."

In the end, perhaps at least one gauge for the Met's contemporary program is what the collection means to artists and what artists mean to the Met. "There are many different reasons artists come here," Wagstaff says. "It's almost a barometer about where their interests lie, and what they can learn and what we can learn from them. That is definitely one of the main cues we'll be responding to." ⧗



# Q/&/A

with Sheena Wagstaff
*by* CAROL KINO

**The word "curator" seems to have been appropriated by every profession lately, from fashion design, to editing, to restaurants. What is unique about being a museum curator?**

There's a difference between what a curator does and what someone who just selects things does. An art curator has a number of different roles, and a curator in a museum with a collection has an additional responsibility. In the old days, we were called a "museum keeper." Our role was to understand, interpret, and research the objects we brought into the collection. Today, it is about bringing a lot of additional intelligences to bear on our selection.

For a contemporary curator, curating also involves working with living artists, which requires another set of skills, whether it's an intellectual partnership or just organizing a project. And all curators need to be multi-hatted, even more so now than twenty years ago. They have to work with donors and collectors. They have to know how the market works, to understand the forces that define art history. The best curators also find time to read and think, and to work with colleagues in the academy. Marrying all that with the ability to judge the actual experience and visual manifestation of art is all part of the curator's role. So it is far more active and nuanced than a chef selecting a menu.

Sheena Wagstaff at the Met Breuer
*photograph by* FRANK VERONSKY (2016)

**We're living in an era where it's tempting to pander to the audience by giving them what they want. Yet surely the best curators give the audience what they need to know. What do you feel the Met's audience should know? What is your vision?**

We have an enormous audience. In fact there are many, many audiences. We know there are artists, regular visitors, and professionals who come here again and again for a particular kind of experience, and that experience is never the same from one visit to the next. This is because people come for a combination of experiences: enjoyment, learning, excitement, provocation—all of those good things.

What I hope we will do at the Breuer is to expand the modern and contemporary field, not just with exhibitions like *Unfinished*, which have a longer historical trajectory, but also through our more contemporary, more geographically expanded program.

I cannot tell you how many people have come up to me, absolutely fascinated, to ask about the Mohamedi show. There are many different reasons why this artist's work has not been seen here, why it has not been ubiquitous in the contemporary art world. But to hear people say, "This is revelatory, thank you for bringing it to my attention"—it's that reaction we want to engender. We want to be a still point in the city when so much is changing—yet at the same time, to expand its outlook.