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An art museum that has a conscience

Brandeis venue puts social justice on display for patrons
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The Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University reopened its doors last week after a summer hiatus and is ready to spread its message once again.

The modern and contemporary exhibits display a wide range of styles and media, but the idea of social justice is the common thread that brings the artwork together.

"Brandeis as an institution has this deep commitment to the concept of social justice," said Chris Bedford, the Henry and Lois Foster Director of the museum. "In large part, the way that we collect, and the exhibitions we choose to do, are supposed to be reflective of that."

The Rose is considered the leading collecting museum of modern and contemporary art in the region and serves as a valuable resource for Brandeis students. "The fundamental impulse behind the museum's program is to be as outward-facing as possible toward the campus and to be as inclusive as possible toward the students," Bedford said. Bedford, 35, is one of the youngest Museum Directors in the United States. He is a native of Scotland and has previously worked at the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. He was the Chief Curator of Exhibitions at Ohio State University's Wexner Center for the Arts before coming to Brandeis a year ago.

This fall's exhibits include "Andy Warhol: Image Machine"; "Light Years: Jack Whitten, 1971-73"; "Minimal and More: '60s and '70s Sculpture from the Collection"; "Rose Video 01: Omer Fast, 5,000 Feet is the Best"; and "Spotlight on the Collection: Al Loving."

This still is from Omer Fast’s “5,000 Feet is the Best,” which is being displayed this fall at the Rose Art Museum.

Whitten’s canvases from the early 1970s will be shown for the first time, “so the work is old in a certain sense,” Bedford said. “But also brand new, which I really like.”

Chris Bedford, Henry and Lois Foster Director of Brandeis University’s Rose Art Museum, pauses in front of Andy Warhol’s portraits of 20th century Jews.

The number of reported anti-Semitic incidents was down nationally in 2012, according to an Anti-Defamation League audit. Do you believe the numbers?

Yes, things are getting better.
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Whitten, who is African-American, has been creating art for the past 40 years, but is only now receiving recognition. “It’s very much a late-career renaissance for him. He’s incredibly deserving; he was making these paintings at the time when no one else was thinking of these terms,” Bedford said.

The exhibition was organized by the Rose’s new Curator-at-Large, Katy Siegel, who “has a very intimate relationship with painting in particular, and has a history as a writer [and] professor, and has incredible relationships with artists themselves,” said Bedford. “I think [Whitten] was wildly ahead of his time and I also think he was out of time, in terms of painting, and also out of time in terms of race,” he added. “He was unintelligible. Now he’s really intelligible and can be seen as a precursor, I think, to a lot of the most important artists working today.”

Al Loving, whose “Self-Portrait #23” and “Untitled” are presented in the exhibition, was also a pioneering black visual artist. His work, however, was recognized earlier than Whitten’s: In 1969, he became the first African-American artist to have a one-person show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. He came to prominence by exploring color, space, line and form in his abstract paintings and mixed-media collages.

Loving’s two pieces on view at The Rose are made from torn strips of canvas, stained with paint, and pieced together with a sewing machine. The resulting works are reminiscent of a variety of things, from his mother’s quilting, to recycled materials, to African ceremonial clothing.

The sculptures from the 1970s, all made by female artists Jackie Ferrara, Mary Miss and Jackie Winsor, were previously exhibited at the Rose in 1996. The current exhibit additionally features works by four male artists active in the 1960s: Carl Andre, Anthony Caro, Donald Judd and Robert Morris. The idea is to juxtapose the female-created art, which Bedford said is “registered in a different kind of gender identity,” with sculptures created by men.

The sculpture exhibit also explores the social-justice theme through the ideas of gender in the 1960s and ’70s, when art, embedded in the cultural revolution of the time, pioneered social and political concerns, that are still relevant today.

In the “Andy Warhol: Image Machine” exhibit, 85 percent to 90 percent of the pieces are taken from the museum’s permanent exhibit. “One thing the show allows us to do is draw out the depth of our holdings in Warhol and demonstrate that there is far more than one painting – in fact, an entire [5,000-squarefoot] exhibition of work,” Bedford said. “As you can see, there’s genuinely all media, so there’s paintings, prints, wallpaper, photographs and even sculpture. So this exhibition, in the broadest terms, looks at the relationship between photography and other media.”

He explained that Warhol’s work explores photography as a genesis and a primary point of contact with the world. The artist used photography as a source material and was able to transform that work into a mode of art making.

The exhibition displays Warhol’s iconic portraits of Joan Collins, Elizabeth Taylor, and Mick Jagger, in addition to the paintings from his “Ten Portraits of Jews of the Twentieth Century,” which include renderings of Sarah Bernhardt, Martin Buber, Sigmund Freud, George Gershwin, Louis Brandeis, Franz Kafka and Golda Meir.

This fall, the museum is also trying something new: Rose Video, a series of exhibits that will feature video art. The first of the series is a film called “5,000 Feet is the Best” by Omer Fast, which deals with the politics and the aftermath of drone strikes. The film explores the “relationship between the real and the unreal,” Bedford explained, “so it’s structured around an interview with a real pilot and someone impersonating a drone pilot.”

The film, which premiered at the Venice Film Festival in 2011, around the time when Osama bin Laden was located with the help of stealth drones, continues to be relevant. “I wanted Omer to be the first video artist that we showed in the space,” Bedford said, “because he is … very socially engaged. But then the Boston Marathon bombings were the other major impulse, and I thought that that piece had a direct relationship for a variety of reasons.”

When asked why Fast’s work is considered an art piece, rather than a film, Bedford explained: “Its structure, for one, which I don’t think has any relationship to cinema at all. I think he uses cinematic techniques and I think he uses very high production values, which are intended to relate it to the common experience of cinema, but I think if you look carefully at the way it’s structured, it would be almost inconceivable for a motion film to be released with that kind of content.”

The other factor that discerns the artwork from regular film is the duration – 31 minutes – an unorthodox length for a documentary. “I think the film is [designed] toward a gallery encounter,” Bedford added, “not a cinematic encounter. And then I think it’s really pointedly political in a way that you don’t often find in popular culture.”