

THE EAST HAMPTON STAR

SHINES FOR ALL

Putting a Little Zen into the Guggenheim

Alexandra Munroe's *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989*

By Janet Goleas

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Whether it's mortgage rates, melting ice caps, civil unrest or traffic congestion, there may never be a better time than right now to put a little Zen in your life. A good place to start: Manhattan's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum where the exhibit "The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989" is currently on view.

Organized by curator and part-time East Hampton resident, Alexandra Munroe, this fiercely ambitious, widely acclaimed exhibit takes a fresh look at the supposition that American art is descended wholly from the European tradition. Instead, she asserts that Asia has played an inestimable role – at least since the mid-19th century -- in the unfolding landscape of western art. Through radical exhibitions like this one, and the 1995 milestone exhibit, "Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky," also at the Guggenheim, Ms. Munroe has forged a path toward a deeper appreciation of the significance of non-western art. This exhibit, truly paradigm shifting in its scope and interpretive focus, has been compared to the 1913 New York Armory Show in which Americans had their first face-to-face encounter with Europe's modern masters.

Ms. Munroe, Senior Curator of Asian Art at the Guggenheim, the first such position at a modern and contemporary art museum in the west, joined the staff in 2006. This extraordinary show was one of the reasons. "For years the west looked at **modern and contemporary** Asian art as derivative," she said as we walked through the galleries last week. "This eventually became an unsustainable conceit -- artists are global. The paradigm of east and west no longer exists."

It's clear from this statement that Alexandra Munroe means business. Her frame is slight and she is quietly beautiful. She speaks quickly but methodically, covering broad intellectual territory in the blink of an eye.

"She's not shy," said Jack Lerner Larsen, founder of East Hampton's LongHouse Reserve. "She has very strong opinions and a great sense of leadership." Ms. Munroe has served on the Board of LongHouse since the beginning.

Ascending to the exhibit along a curving ramp, we stopped in front of one of the signature works in the show, an installation titled "The Death of James Lee Byers." The artist (of the same name) lived in Japan for ten years and came away deeply influenced by Japanese art and culture. Ms. Munroe discussed the influence of Noh theatre in this body of work.

"Every Noh drama begins in the afterlife," she said. The installation consisted of a five-sided room, every inch of which was covered with luscious gold leaf – so much, in fact, that glittery swaths hovered everywhere. On a plinth in the center of the installation, five crystals represented the late artist. The work celebrates the transcendent state of the eternal present or perhaps the stateside

equivalent of presence/absence. It is an ecstatic and visionary work. Seductive and deeply personal, “It injects us into the spirit world,” said Ms. Munroe.

More to the point, on a nearby wall, the conceptual artist Tom Marioni had drawn a circle in which his shoulder socket served as the compass point. Pencil in hand; arm fully extended; rotate. The resulting circle is neither perfect nor imperfect. The art, part performance, part conventional drawing, is sublime.

You could argue that therein – among form and emptiness -- lies the core of Zen thinking. In Paul Kos’s “Sound of Ice Melting,” two bricks of ice lay on a platform surrounded by live sound equipment. What exactly is the sound of melting ice? Well, it’s pretty quiet. But in a world of Zen, no circle is empty and nothing is silent, so the very act of recording the event is a conceptual exercise that speaks volumes to Ms. Munroe’s thesis of the universality of Asian influence.

Back on earth, Ms. Munroe discussed the genesis of her appreciation of Asian art. “I **began** to speak Japanese at age 13,” she recalled. “My family moved to **the Kansai region of Japan** then. **We lived there for three years.**” She not only speaks fluent Japanese, but writes it as well. “Oh, yes – of course. That’s the fun part,” she smiled.

“My mother was my first guru,” she smiled. “She had a library filled with books about Asia – she still does.”

Ms. Munroe returned to Japan as a young adult, and there she lived and studied Zen Buddhism at Kyoto’s Daitokuji Temple for several years. “I almost jumped ship and became a **Zen Buddhist**,” she sighed. “I never became a **formal** Buddhist, but my experiences in Japan did, at least in part, shape my aesthetic tastes.”

The exhibit is configured in sections, and within each section is a potpourri of abstract art, minimalism, conceptualism and performance. An exhaustive overview of some 150 years, 250 works of art and 100 artists, it all begins in the gray-green galleries that contain Mary Cassatt’s etchings inspired by the popularization of Japanese Ukiyo-e prints. James Whistler, too, was influenced first by the sweeping fad of “Japonisme,” and then, more substantively, by the compositional and graphic qualities inherent in the art of Japan. Later, the Asian sensibility provided artists a shift in conceptual thinking, and in that, a wormhole that lead to broad ideas of transcendence, dematerialization and process.

One of the stunning things about “The Third Mind” is the number of West Coast artists included. It is far beyond anything seen heretofore in a New York museum. There are broad selections of Bay Area artists, the Visionary Artists of the Seattle area and Los Angeles’s Light and Space artists. This alone is revolutionary.

The East Hampton home she shares with her husband, Robert Rosenkranz, is perched astride a long edge of the Atlantic. “I walk on the beach every morning,” said Ms. Munroe. “And I’ve been enjoying digging in my garden.”

“It’s a classic, wonderful house,” said Jack Lerner Larsen. “Bar none, they have the best croquet lawn in the Hamptons,” he continued. “Their gardens are exceptional – they have a meadow, a cottage garden and a woodland walk. It’s perfection.” He went on, “They planted a vegetable garden that overlooks the sea. It’s tour de force – not an easy thing to do.” Local museums and horticultural venues clamor to feature the property on their annual garden tours.

When the Guggenheim celebrates its 50-year anniversary later this spring, they will exhibit works by its famed architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. Mr. Wright was also deeply inspired by the Asian sensibility, and while most American architects of the last century turned to Europe for inspiration, his muse was Japan. So it is especially fitting that Ms. Munroe's landmark exhibition has taken place here.

Clearly she has a knack for organizing rousing exhibitions. Last spring, Ms. Munroe and former Guggenheim director, Thomas Krens, mounted a retrospective of Cai Guo-Qiang, one of China's most preeminent artists. The term "blockbuster" doesn't quite do justice to the eye-popping spectacle that was "Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want To Believe." And rarely, if ever, had Wright's concave walls and spiral ramps – so often demonized as besotted with an architectural extravagance that is at odds with the way we usually view art – been utilized to such tremendous affect.

Dominating the central foyer, ground zero here, nine Chevrolets tumbled down from the soaring rotunda as if let loose from a giant cereal box. Pierced with multiple LED light rods that shared striking similarities to acupuncture needles, each sedan pulsed with color as if a squadron of car bombs were eternally imploding right on Manhattan's Museum Mile. Further inside, the exhibit was filled with airborne wolves, stuffed tigers, ghostly ship hulls and pyrotechnics. The show, extraordinary in its scope, was widely applauded.

Mr. Wright's curling ramps, curved walls and imposing atrium have vexed many an installation, but it seems in the hands of Ms. Munroe the Guggenheim itself is more comfortable in its own skin. It's not just the institution's lack of flat walls or the need for a more flexible space for sculpture. The big challenge is to overcome the forced march imposed by Mr. Wright's circling ramps. Visitors sometimes refer to it as a conveyor belt.

One of the triumphs of Ms. Munroe's installation of "The Third Mind" is that the action outside the spiral is so engaging it manages to outwit the sense of forced linearity. It makes you work the room, just as you would in a big white cube.

There are mood-shifting installations throughout the exhibit. La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela's "Dream House," located in one of several antechambers off the main spiral, is so fluffy and crimson that you barely notice the ear-splitting drone inside. Andy Warhol's "Sleep," looks deceptively static on a floating edge-to-edge screen. And there is so much more – Nam June Paik, John Cage, Linda Montano, John La Farge, Georgia O'Keefe, Franz Kline, Jack Kerouac.

One of the treats in this lively exhibit is Ann Hamilton's "Human carriage" which careens down the spiral balustrade, clanging Tibetan cymbals at random intervals. Sliced books that serve as weights sway in mid-air alongside pulleys and other components. The action draws visitors away from the spiral walkway to look over the edge, and there they can take a moment to contemplate the transformative power of art and the expanding universe in which we live.

"The Third Mind" is on view through April 19th.