



Installation view: Frank Stella right and Frances Barth yellow painting in the center.

DMA abstract exhibition mixes it up

ARTS MARCH 2015

Written by **Rick Brettell**

The Dallas Museum of Art's two curators of contemporary art, newly appointed Gavin Delahunty and Gabe Ritter, present a wonderfully bracing, panoramic survey of post-World War II abstract art, largely from the Permanent Collection, in the museum's gorgeous Barrel Vault and one of its Quadrant Galleries. Coherent, it is not. What it is exciting and full of ideas.

The installation almost makes looking at contemporary art, which many museum goers find challenging, into a visual sport. For those art groupies who know what is hot and what is not, there is plenty of fodder for argument and discussion in "Bold Abstractions: Selections From the DMA Collection 1966-1976."

Three of the Quadrant Galleries host installations by single artists, two of them function as part of "Bold Abstractions" — a major 1967 felt-and-metal floor piece by the California-born, New York-based Barry Le Va and a re-creation of a 1971 one-gallery exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art by the African-born British painter Frank Bowling. The charmingly disorienting installation by the U.S.-based Korean artist Chosil Kil is unrelated.

There is little that links these three powerfully separate installations. To counter the internal incoherence of these three ingredients, Delahunty decided to mount an exhibition in the remainder of the vast space devoted to international abstraction from those 10 years. He rummaged through the racks and storage rooms of the DMA and raided the homes and storage areas of local private collectors to celebrate this extraordinarily rich decade in sculpture and painting — there are no photographs, videos, or, save the Le Va, installations.

These range from near-canonical works by Robert Motherwell, Frank Stella, Brice Marden, Richard Tuttle, Jules Olitski and Richard Diebenkorn to lesser-known or out-of-fashion works by Americans **Frances Barth**, Lynda Benglis, Sheila Hicks, Joan Snyder, Alan Saret, Alfred Jensen, Julian Stanczak and William T. Wiley — note the gender equivalence — as well as artists from England, Belgium and South Korea. An entire room is devoted to the Italian *arte povera* movement so well represented in Dallas collections.

How do we make sense of all of this? The simplest answer is that we don't, because that is really not the point of this playfully serious attempt to wrench museum viewers from the familiar names and -isms of postwar abstraction. What we think we know is juxtaposed with what we have probably never seen, creating conditions for new thinking and fresh aesthetic responses. It is an experience of liberation very unlike the pedantic earnestness of so many installations of contemporary art. And the labels are helpful, full of information and decidedly not preachy.

What is particularly interesting to look at is the acquisition dates and donor names because it becomes clear that the DMA itself bought or was given a good deal of the most interesting of this work when it was new. (The DMA was the first encyclopedic Texas museum to hire a curator of contemporary art.)

There are numerous accession numbers from the 1970s, and Delahunty says that the wonderful painting by Jensen has not been shown for 25 years and those by Barth, Olitski and Wiley for 20 years, and that the works by Paul Waldman, Snyder and the extraordinary ceramic by Lucio Fontana have never been shown in public before. So in with the old, which Delahunty and the DMA make new. There is even a painting by an artist, Jim Malone, who was a preparator for the DMA in the bracing days of the 1970s. All looks so fresh that we want more of this reshuffling of the deck of contemporary art.

Rick Brettell holds the Margaret McDermott distinguished chair at the University of Texas at Dallas. He is a former director of the Dallas Museum of Art.