

SPERONE WESTWATER  
257 Bowery New York 10002  
T + 1 212 999 7337 F + 1 212 999 7338  
www.speronewestwater.com

Bendtsen, Daniel. "Wexners' private art collection an unusual task to curate." *thelantern.com* (*The Lantern*), 22 September 2014.

## thelantern



Les Wexner and curator Robert Storr talk at the opening of "Transfigurations."  
Credit: Daniel Bendtsen / Asst. arts editor

"Synthetic cubism" or "early 20th century sculpture" are the kind of qualifiers commonly dividing up galleries in art museums, where it's typical to neatly catalogue eminent works alongside their stylistic peers.

But "Transfigurations," the Wexner Center for the Arts' fall exhibit, is markedly different. Though it has handfuls of the kind of big-name pieces a museum might like to count among its permanent collection, it's not a cohesive exhibit of like-minded works.

The reason is simple: It's a collection not curated from an academic standpoint, but the sum of Les and Abigail Wexner's decades-long hobby of buying art. To mark the arts center's

25th anniversary, the paintings and sculptures are on loan to the Wexner Center through December, and were compiled with solely the individual merits in mind, Abigail Wexner said.

"We never thought about this as trying to create a collection of a certain artist. It was just each of these artists that were interesting to us as paintings became available," she said at the exhibition's Friday opening.

Les Wexner concurred, saying the collection has never been stagnant or deliberate.

"The collection has evolved, and hopefully will continue to evolve, in a very personal way," he said. "We never made that conscious decision that we are going to do figures and not color field, or figures rather than geometric shapes. It just wasn't part of it."

A collection of works amassed organically by personal taste provides an unusual curating challenge, one that "Transfigurations" curator Robert Storr said he welcomed.

"Wow, a chance to really have some fun," Storr said was his reaction when the possibility of working on "Transfigurations" first arose. The collection, which is dominated by the works of Pablo Picasso, Alberto Giacometti and Jean Dubuffet, has incongruencies as each artists worked in a different period and from a different mindset.

For example, Picasso was a well-canonized master by the time the two younger artists arrived on the scene.

SPERONE WESTWATER  
257 Bowery New York 10002  
T + 1 212 999 7337 F + 1 212 999 7338  
[www.speronewestwater.com](http://www.speronewestwater.com)

“There’s a lot of father-son Oedipal drama going on in this room,” Storr said. “There’s a lot of internal conversations going on.”

Storr is a professor and dean of the Yale University School of Art, but he’s also a populist who liked taking a less academic approach to how the works were organized in the gallery.

“I’m self-educated. I don’t have a Ph.D. I don’t approach things by what I know. I approach things by what I see,” he said. “I have a great belief that the best art should be seen by the most people. I also believe that people without a lot of knowledge about art see it just as well, and sometimes better, than people with lots of knowledge.”

Wexner Center director Sherri Geldin said Storr is a man “renowned in the field for being someone who deeply, deeply looks at art” and is the ideal person for curating a collection that is “tough and uncompromising.”

While the educational aspect of the exhibition is important, Storr said he wanted to make sure that part was kept separate from the actual artwork, so that visitors could have their own personal connections with the works “without someone else telling them what to think.”

Storr said the unusual design of the Wexner Center is particularly difficult to show art in, but its uniqueness allows the ability to create new meanings from the organization.

To complement the building’s long ascending ramp that connects each gallery, Storr chose to place the Edgar Degas’ sculpture “Little Dancer Aged Fourteen Years” at the bottom of the ramp. At the ramp’s pinnacle, he placed the gigantic “Tall Standing Woman 1” by Giacometti.

The contrast of Degas’ “small and fragile” 19th century girl has new connotations in contrast to the rougher bronze work by Giacometti, Storr said, which he hoped would create “some kind of subliminal connection between these two representations of femininity that will connect the front to the back, the 19th century to the 20th century.”

Storr also relished in the opportunity to realize some pipe-dreams of his, such as making a “crowd” of Giacometti sculptures. That crowd, though, doesn’t exist in isolation, and instead is surrounded by walls of horse paintings by Susan Rothenberg. It’s an unlikely pairing of large-scale minimalistic paintings looming over a hub of Giacometti’s harsh bronze figures.

“Most of my colleagues would not have done a show that has Susan Rothenberg in it. They would have done a show that focuses on the School of Paris,” Storr said. “I’ve known Susan’s work for a long time. I know that she was not influenced by Giacometti as much as she just encountered him when she developed her own work and thought about him in relation to a mature set of propositions that she was working through.”

However, he said he liked the idea of bringing the different mentalities into one room.

“What a wonderful opportunity to actually have this meeting between these two artists. They had been talking to each other through the vapors but now they’re having a conversation in the same room,” he said.

Rothenberg, the only living artist represented in the exhibition, came to visit the collection last week and Geldin was pleased to find Rothenberg appreciated the new display.

SPERONE WESTWATER  
257 Bowery New York 10002  
T + 1 212 999 7337 F + 1 212 999 7338  
[www.speronewestwater.com](http://www.speronewestwater.com)

“Susan is not an easy woman to please. She’s tough in her own way, and I’ve never seen her so taken with seeing her work in juxtaposition,” Geldin said.

Storr said he worked to make sure that “this is an exhibition and not a display of trophies,” a process that required him to reject some of the Wexner’s collection, including a drawing by Henri Matisse.

“You don’t set up a full-fielded team of Picassos and then have a Matisse from a different period trying to defend the goal by itself,” he said.

The process of turning a personal connection into an exhibit caused the Wexners to reflect on what interested them about artists like Giacometti and Picasso, and Les Wexner said he’s drawn some connections between the artwork and his own worldview.

“As an entrepreneur, I’m fascinated with people that were curious, because a lot of being an entrepreneur is being curious, seeing things in new ways,” Les Wexner said, adding that the artists he likes “were very entrepreneurial because they were taking big risks and they saw the world in a different way.”

Storr, too, found interesting threads between the Wexners and the artists whose works they collect.

“The hand knows a lot and does things on its own, and I think the eye of the collector is the same way,” he said. “Eventually you may learn what went on behind it, but what you really see is the evidence of the choice that was made.”

While the Wexners deny the exhibition is any sort of public service on their part, Les Wexner said he hoped the display might bring some recognition to his alma mater.

Ohio State is “in a business of education, and the measure of success is your reputation,” he said. “This institution, in particular, has a great reputation because it is creativity in process. It’s artistic entrepreneurs in real time, creating.”