



Chuck Close, *Agnes*, oil on canvas, 102" x 84"; The Doris and Donald Fisher Collection and SFMOMA; © Chuck Close, courtesy Pace Wildenstein, New York; photo: courtesy Ellen Page Wilson



Gerhard Richter, Janus, 1983, oil on canvas, 188-1/8" x 98-3/8", The Doris and Donald Fisher Collection and SFMOMA; © Gerhard Richter; photo: Lucas Schoormans

Calder to Warhol: Introducing the Fisher Collection The Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco

by Emese Krunák-Hajagos

It all began with a pair of jeans.

Don Fisher, a third generation San Franciscan, started his career as an entrepreneur in the 1960s. He bought the Capitol Park Hotel in Sacramento and leased space to a Levi's salesman who opened a showroom. Levi's pants are part of the American identity, and people love them, especially the original 501 blue jeans. Don himself had grown up wearing them and needed a new

pair. When he tried on the pants in the showroom, none fit. He tried all the Levi's stores in the city but still couldn't find the right size. "What if someone put together all the sizes, styles and colors of Levi's in one store?", thought Don. And GAP was born. The name refers to the generation gap and the store targeted 12-to-25-year-old shoppers, displaying records and tapes beside the pants. Don and Doris Fisher

founded and transformed a single store into a \$15 billion global business and became a part of pop culture history.

Doris and Donald Fisher have spent about 40 years collecting art. The first pieces of their collection were prints by Stella and Lichtenstein in 1973 but they became serious collectors after GAP went public in 1976. They wouldn't buy a piece unless they both loved it. They didn't have a dealer or an advisor but learned about art as they went along. The Fishers' method was a rather romantic one; they visited the artists in their studios, talked to them, got to know them and purchased the work directly from them. They didn't buy emerging artists but tended to collect an artist's work once he/she was somewhat established. The Fisher collection is huge – about 1100 pieces – from the works of Calder to the contemporary artists. Altogether 185 artists, most of them part of modern and contemporary art history, such as Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, Andy Warhol, Agnes Martin, Frank Stella, Chuck Close, Richard Serra, Cy Twombly as well as the German artists Gerhard Richter, George Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer and Sigmar Polke. Many of these artists are represented by a series of works showing the stages of their career and creative evolution. This exhibition is just a preview of the collection showing 160 works. The show was so rich, I spent two days viewing it, going back to some works to have a closer look, visiting some rooms again to make sure I didn't miss anything. It was a feast for the eyes and for the mind. The exhibition offered a great diversity of styles with figurative and abstract art equally represented. What these works have in common is their extremely high quality. All of the works are large-scale and most of the artists have their own room. Curator Gary Garrels organized the exhibition in an effort "to create a conversation between pieces of work" and "there is no beginning or end" in the show.

Calder was Don Fisher's favorite and he collected 45 works throughout

the artist's 50-year career. Don wrote, "In my opinion, Calder is the greatest sculptor that ever lived because he was creative. There is such a variation in his work, and he did it all with material that cost practically nothing." Calder's optimism, playfulness and inventive spirit are the characteristics that the Fishers wanted to bring to GAP.

German art is well represented in the collection. The 23 paintings of Gerhard Richter's oeuvre are considered the finest body of his work in the world. Richter had many stages in his career, both abstract and representational. He painted fields, cityscapes and the sea, frozen gestures on monochrome panels (*Gymnastics*, 1967), painterly memories of WWII, as well as portraits and finally wall-size beautiful color orgies using the squeegee technique. Besides their variety, Richter's works are united by his intellectual and elegant approach toward his subjects. In his paintings George Baselitz too addressed the shameful and bloody events of the war in an analytic but also emotional way. He became famous for his upside-down portraits, and two outstanding examples of them are in this show (*Elke in Armchair*, 1976 and *The Last Self-Portrait*, 1982). The tension in his works between expressive, sometimes social content and painterly abstraction is remarkable. Anselm Kiefer's monumental canvases address WWII and its aftermath in the German conscience. He uses resin, dirt and hay to enrich the surfaces of his panels and scrap metal to create his sculptures. In a large piece Kiefer attempted to reconstruct a tactical plan that went wrong. He also created memorials to the war's victims, from raven-haired *Sulamith* (1983) to *Golden Margarethe* (1981).

The minimalist Richard Serra is known for his steel sculptures. He often constructs site-specific installations on a scale that dwarfs the surroundings. He pushed the boundaries of sculpture and faced the consequences; his *Tilted Arc* was removed from the Federal Plaza in New York City as scrap metal and many

of his plans have never been executed. The metal installations shown in this exhibition have a brutal beauty. In the scorched surfaces we see evidence of the strong natural force of fire on the rigid metal and the artist's struggle to control the outcome (*1-1-1-1*, 1969).

The fourth floor is divided into two big sections. One half focuses on Pop and figurative art. Emphasizing a particular strength of the collection, two galleries feature Andy Warhol's

oeuvre from his early years until his death. Besides the iconic pieces such as *Silver Marlon* (1963), *Triple Elvis* (1963), nine multicolored *Marilyns* (1976-1986), there are some important works from the *Most Wanted Men* series (*No. 12, Frank B*, 1964). Portraits from his later years are very expressive such as the double, overlapping faces of *Robert Mapplethorpe* (1983). Warhol's *Self-Portrait* (1986) is remarkable for its unusual composition. The artist's flying



George Baselitz, *Elke in Armchair*, 1976 oil on canvas, 97-1/2" x 78"; *The Doris and Donald Fisher Collection and SFMOMA*; © George Baselitz; photo Ian Reeves

and unruly white hair fills most of the image, and above tight lips his sharp eyes look at us.

Chuck Close, who re-invigorated portraiture, fills two galleries with his huge canvases. In the late 1960s and early 1970s photorealistic paintings, under the style of super-realism or hyper-realism, started to appear in exhibitions. The artists worked from photographic stills to create paintings that look like photographs. Close in order to create his grid work copies of photographs, puts a grid on both the photo and on the canvas, and copies the original section by section. Each square in the grid filled with a shape, usually a circle, and painted with colors, surrounded by white giving an "average" hue to them. The tools he used were airbrush, rags, razor blade and an eraser mounted on a power drill. In his canvases he paints only the model's head. At a close look the details are overwhelming, and the painting only make sense from a distance at which the portrait is both very expressive and resembles the model (*Agnes*, 1998). As Close said, "What I want in my paintings is the purist intensity, the purist saturation." In 1988 he suffered a spinal artery collapse, which left him partly paralyzed. Close, while he cannot grip the brush, continues to paint with it strapped to his wrist.

The other galleries on the fourth floor highlight abstract art. In the first room beautiful gestural paintings by Sam Francis, Lee Krasner and Joan Mitchell greet us. Single galleries are dedicated to Agnes Martin, Frank Stella, Cy Twombly and the later works of Philip Guston. Agnes Martin is one of Doris Fisher's favorite artists, as she said, "her paintings move me deeply." The Canadian born Martin began her unique, simplified abstract style in the 1960s. Her "spare abstraction" might look like Minimalist art but it is more spiritual in inspiration, influenced by Asian philosophy. She wanted to depict the inner states of existence, saying,



Richard Serra, 1-1-1-1, 1969, hot rolled steel, four plates, each 48" x 48" x 1"; one pole, 84 inches long, 4 inches diameter; The Doris and Donald Fisher Collection and SFMOMA; © Richard Serra / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photo: courtesy Gagolian Gallery

"They are about what [is] known forever in the mind." Martin's paintings seem to follow strict rules, regulated by grids and in them she repeats a letter or a motive over and over again, until it becomes a rhythm covering the whole surface of the canvas. Her white or pastel-colored, delicate, quiet paintings radiate peace and comfort. They are like prayers. Philip Guston, who was an important artist in developing Abstract Expressionism, turned to a more figurative style in the late 1960s because he "wanted to tell stories." He created his own images such as Klansman, light bulbs, shoes and clocks in a cartoonish manner. In his painting *As it goes* (1978) the artist captures time as it goes by using a group of geometric shapes and clocks while representing himself through his glasses and paintbrushes. The deep reds, simple grayish tones and strong black outlines create a tension and give a graphic character to his pieces. Cy Twombly suggests a narrative and builds a personal myth with his brushstrokes, swirling pencil and pastel lines in

Second voyage to Italy (1962).

A few rooms are filled with photo-based works from John Baldessari, Sophie Calle, Barbara Kruger, Thomas Struth and Jeff Wall. In Jeff Wall's *Transparency, Tattoos and Shadows* (2000), the poses of the three figures do not suggest a narrative, quite the opposite. Their lack of communication is apparent but the shadows created by the sun shining through the leaves, the vertical fences and their patterns on the tattooed bodies are fascinating. Frank Stella's three large works occupy the last gallery. Stella, whose large geometric wall panel was a part of our lives at the David Mirvish Bookstore in Toronto, changed his style in the 1980s. During this time the increasingly deep relief of his paintings became fully three dimensional and sculptural (*Chase, Third Day*, 1989). It was a logical move for him since as he said, "A sculpture is just a painting cut out and stood up somewhere." Walking through the hallway we hear a beautiful aria from Mozart's *Magic Flute* and stepping into the room see William Kentridge's black

box theatre (*Preparing the Flute*, 2005). It is very mesmerizing to watch the puppets play with white birds while following the rhythm of the music, amid swirling lines of light, bright as stars.

The Fishers wanted to share their joy of art with the community. Their original idea was a new museum on the historical site in Presidio but the plan fell through. Ultimately they decided to give the collection to SFMOMA on a 100 year renewable loan. After receiving the gift the museum announced a new 60,000-square-foot addition to be called the Fisher Wing, planned by the architectural team Snøhetta, opening in 2016.

Right: Philip Guston, As It Goes, 1978, oil on canvas, 76" x 102"; The Doris and Donald Fisher Collection and SFMOMA; © The Estate of Philip Guston; photo: courtesy The Doris and Donald Fisher Collection



Bottom: Frank Stella, The Chase, Third Day, 1989, mixed media on etched magnesium and aluminum, 100-1/2" x 145" x 38-1/2"; The Doris and Donald Fisher Collection and SFMOMA; © 2010 Frank Stella / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photo: courtesy The Doris and Donald Fisher Collection

