

GAGOSIAN



Fondation Beyeler celebrates 25 years with greatest hits show, from Picasso to Rachel Whiteread

The gorgeous building has played host to important shows in the past quarter-century

Jackie Wullschläger



Dealers spend a lifetime gambling on the immortality of their artists; few leave their own monuments. An exception is Ernst Beyeler, the Swiss railway worker's son who started his Basel gallery in the 1940s, made a fortune trading blue-chip names, was befriended by Picasso and Giacometti, and in 1997 built the Fondation Beyeler to house the works he kept for himself.

If there is a more feel-good museum experience than the Beyeler, I have yet to encounter it. An outstanding collection and must-see exhibitions (Edward Hopper in 2020 and Goya in 2021 were beacons during the pandemic) are housed in Renzo Piano's long, luminous glass and stone building set in the exquisite park of the baroque Villa Berower, where a visit has to end with kaffee und kuchen.

For this autumn's 25th anniversary show, it begins with a cup of stale black tea, the surface a jagged mouldy membrane, enormously enlarged and photographed at aerial view to suggest the

broken crust of the earth's surface. Hanging in the foyer, Wolfgang Tillmans's "Chaos Cup" from 1997 — it's the same age as the museum — wittily introduces a birthday greatest hits parade. Turn left and you meet Rousseau's faux-jungle "The Hungry Lion Throws itself upon the Antelope" and Brancusi's streamlined marble abstraction "Bird". Turn right for Matisse's sensuous arabesque cut-out "Blue Nude" and Miró's hallucinatory ladder to the sky "Landscape with Rooster". Each, like Tillmans, reconsiders how reality can be represented and distorted into a new expression of truth.



The Fondation Beyeler building sits in the exquisite park of the baroque Villa Berower near Basel © Mark Niedermann

When it opened, I enjoyed the Beyeler as the apogee of bourgeois Swiss pleasure. But over the years, the paradise in the park has come to embody something more, as Beyeler's insistence on "proven works", almost all European and American, stands at odds with major modern art museums focused on the global 21st century and concerns with post-colonialism and gender. The Beyeler launched only three years before Tate Modern, but it belongs to a different world, asserting modern art's specific historic place, in contrast to the pluralistic, hierarchy-free mash-up of 21st-century culture. How valid is this approach, and can it last?

Ernst Beyeler's vision of painting and sculpture in harmony with nature and architecture is uplifting, calming and supremely confident. The voluptuous saturated hues of Rothko's square and oblong blurs in "Untitled Red, Orange" echo the building's rich porphyry columns. The expansive view towards cornfields and low hills from the day-bright spaces is repeated in Van Gogh's airy "Wheatfield with Cornflowers". In fading light, Ellsworth Kelly's huge folded aluminium sail "White Curves" has a ghostly presence among the trees.

Monet's immersive "Nymphéas" triptych faces the Beyeler's own actual lily pond — this one presided over by Thomas Schütte's chunkily appealing, water-spitting "Hare" (2013). With human hands and one ear flopping forward, the four-metre bronze animal, its craggy form mirrored in the water amid scattered leaves and trailing reeds, is as beloved a part of the collection as the Monets, which is important: Beyeler died in 2010, but his collection is not standing still. He chose its ancestors and it is fascinating to watch their DNA threading through the works the Fondation has acquired since: an argument for contemporary art as a continuum with modernism.



'Poltergeist' (2020) by Rachel Whiteread © Robert Bayer



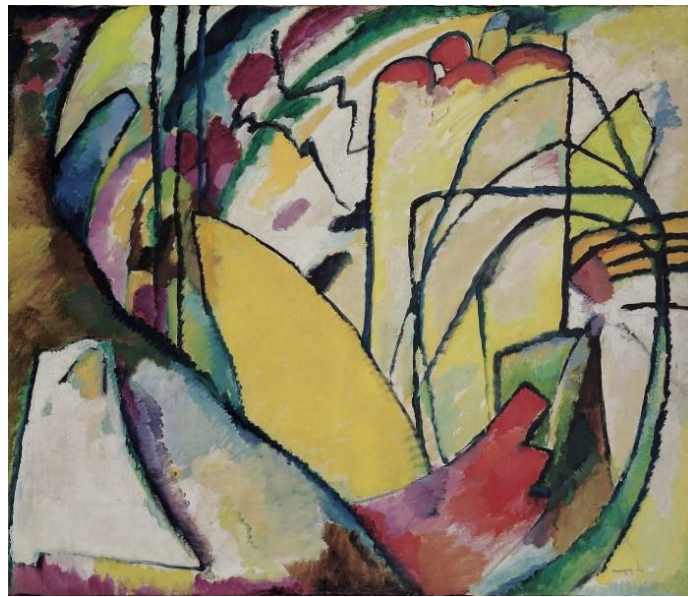
'Woman with Child in Stroller' by Duane Hanson shares space with (left to right) 'Grande Femme IV' (1960), 'Tête de Diego au col roulé' (c1954), 'Walking Man I' (1960) by Alberto Giacometti © Lucia Hunziker

Rachel Whiteread's collapsing shed, "Poltergeist" (2020), an eerie shell of a shelter in found wood and metal, painted bleach-white, is a late iteration of postwar sculpture's fragile/solid constructed/deconstructed aesthetic. Disaster has torn through the edifice, but it remains upright, light bounces off the spiky fragments: it has survived. There's an affinity with Giacometti's pared-down figures, precariously maintaining human presence. Beyeler called "Walking Man" "the veritable trademark of the Fondation Beyeler".

In the collection catalogue, art historian Gottfried Boehm says the foundation "pays tribute to the experience of a generation . . . centred on great, heroic, classical modern art" and Beyeler's belief in "the singularity and enduring appeal of the individual work". There are no quotas or gap-filling, though women artists have dominated recent acquisitions. There are rooms in the

anniversary show devoted to Marlene Dumas' seeping, discomforted figures, and to Tacita Dean's chalk-on-blackboard panorama "Cumulus" (2016), which picks up in monochrome a conversation with Monet's reflected clouds: play of light and shadow, time unfolding, the ephemeral and the eternal. Beyeler's spirit still guides: he "distrusted programmes, manifestos and theories", and barred minimalism and "works of an expanded artistic concept in the sense of, for example, Joseph Beuys or more recent installation art".

Sure taste paid off. Invited to take his pick from Picasso's studio in 1966, Beyeler garnered key works which became the core of the Fondation's permanent Picasso retrospective-in-miniature. It ranges from "Woman" (1907), a large oil study for "Les Femmes d'Alger", to "Reclining nude playing with a cat" (1964), parodying Manet's "Olympia" and starring an exuberant Jacqueline Picasso.



'Improvisation' (1910) by Wassily Kandinsky © Robert Bayer

In the 1950s Beyeler scraped and borrowed to find \$4,500 for Kandinsky's "Improvisation 10", an important 1910 marker in the journey to abstraction — mountain path, houses, fortress on a rock, rainbow are still distinguishable within a panoply of rushing forms. He waited decades for the perfect follow-up: in 1990 he bought "Fugue" (1914), an explosive composition entirely about chords of colour, for \$20.9mn, then a Kandinsky record. The seller? New York's Guggenheim, which deaccessioned the painting to raise funds to enlarge its holdings of minimalism.

Beyeler's decisions give modernity as unfolded here a distinctive flavour: historic grandeur, a concentration on masterpieces. Although Boehm claims "the Beyeler collection itself confirms the gap opening up between the modern art of the past, whose side it takes, and the modern art of the present day, which it excludes", this does not mean rejecting the contemporary. The Beyeler is bang on message spotting today's landmark works within significant careers such as "Poltergeist", Whiteread's turning point from casting in favour of constructing and assemblage.



'Nu Bleu I' (1952) by Henri Matisse © Robert Bayer



Two hyperreal sculptures by Hanson blend in with the exhibits and visitors alike © Lucia Hunziker

Director Sam Keller says he seeks to “open up new perspectives and promote a dialogue” with Beyeler’s legacy. Louise Bourgeois and Gerhard Richter, “unexpected intermediaries . . . invoking the modernist tradition”, joined the collection in 2012. Keller is also a genius at innovatively refreshing history. In the anniversary show, Duane Hanson’s life-size hyperrealist multimedia sculptures keep comic company with famous residents. “Woman with Child in Stroller” ambles towards Giacometti’s “Walking Man”. “Old Lady in Folding Chair”

sits alongside “Madame Cézanne in a Yellow Armchair”, each woman resigned yet forceful. “Window Washer” is about to start cleaning a vast floor-to-ceiling pane giving on to the garden. Inscribed on the collection’s catalogue cover is Monet’s modest hope when he began painting Rouen cathedral: “It might turn out well, if the sunshine lasts.” At the Beyeler after 25 years, the sun is still shining.

To January 8, fondationbeyeler.ch