

# OUR VISION

Recent curatorial decisions reflect the institution's values, argue Baltimore Museum of Art curators Asma Naem and Katy Siegel



As scholars and curators at the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA), we feel compelled to respond to Martin Gammon's opinion piece on the museum's decision to deaccession works by Clyfford Still, Brice Marden and Andy Warhol.

Gammon frames the situation as a battle between timeless aesthetic values and opportunism. What actually underlies his argument, and so many others like his, is a fundamental misunderstanding – or rejection – of the equity-based vision that undergirds our decision. It captures a flagrant disregard for the rigorous reimagining of art-historical and institutional ethos that the BMA has undertaken in response to the demand that museums begin to live their missions on a day-to-day basis, moving beyond mere rhetoric towards measurable actions with measurable consequences.

On the face of it, Gammon attacks the curatorial rationale for the deaccessioning of these artworks with claims of their significance. But as is true historically, this deaccessioning does not render judgment of individual objects; it assesses context – or, in other words, the way they function in a collection. He also discounts the possibility of categorical – as opposed to monographic – redundancy, despite the breadth in which the

BMA holds Abstract Expressionist artists of Clyfford Still's generation.

Going further, we maintain that the multi-faceted development of gestural painting among many artists – Willem de Kooning, Norman Lewis, Helen Frankenthaler, Ed Clark, Elizabeth Murray, Mary Lovelace O'Neal, Mark Bradford, Amy Sillman – is at least as compelling as a standard origins story. The BMA collection puts these artists into relation with each other, rendering gestural painting profoundly alive as well as historical. These curatorial decisions reflect the same values we seek institutionally: equity and diversity make history fairer, more accurate and more meaningful in the present.

The other key precept of context is proportion with respect to the collection overall. Gammon's book reaffirms the singular role that deaccessioning plays in "worldmaking" – the curatorial change to articulate a clear vision for a collection. Building on three years of acquisitions focused on parity for Black artists, and a year devoted exclusively to female-identifying artists, the curatorial staff is working with a rigorously considered road map for both acquisitions and collection installations for the coming years.

Proportion is not only additive. For decades, the place of late Warhol in the collection has been disproportionately



The gestural painting of artists such as Mark Bradford, whose exhibition was held at the museum in 2018 (above), is now an institutional focus. Below: a recent acquisition was Baltimore artist Amy Sherard's *Planes, rockets, and the spaces in between* (2018)



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large, and to the exclusion of many artists and many historical narratives. Every inch of wall space telegraphs a museum's values – whom we esteem and whom we exclude. The issue of inequity is a glaring blind spot in Gammon's assessments of value and historical revision; he places his faith in the market's ability to accurately and fairly reflect value.

Gammon also suggests a lack of transparency with respect to financial criteria, and yet we have been completely open about the role of market value. More seriously, he implies a sleight of hand around the use of funds. Taking his concern at face value, let's set aside the dismissive language characterizing the attempt to pay people a living wage as "shoring up some salary disparities".

As the Association of Art Museum Directors leadership has affirmed, the BMA's definition of collection care and the planned use of funds are within current guidelines. It is because the museum is not in financial straits that it is able to endow collection care and, rather than reduce the bottom budgetary line, use the money to support mission-based needs: truly free admission to all exhibitions; providing evening hours; DAEI (diversity, accessibility, equity and inclusion) programmes to restructure the museum's staffing; and salary equity across the institution.

Gammon's real disagreement with the BMA is about what a museum is and to whom it is responsible. We believe that the mission of the museum is civic, and that its dual responsibility is to create an internally equitable structure and an externally equitable relationship with the public. Too many critics routinely enlist a white and privileged few tied to – dependent on – the status quo, but unsurprisingly fail to consider who isn't speaking. Such polemics completely ignore not only the larger Baltimore public, but educators, colleagues and BMA staff and committee members, many from under-represented backgrounds.

Such individuals have voiced strong support for the deaccession, and for the possibilities for new, multiple and significant narratives that resonate with all of Baltimore, as well as with better researched, less received, harder won art histories. Museums are not mausoleums or treasure houses; they are living organisms, oriented to the present as well as the past, and that is where the fundamental disagreement lies.

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