

ART

A Museum That Lives Within Its Me

By JORI FINKEL

WHEN Ann Philbin took the reins of the Hammer Museum here eight years ago, she knew one thing for sure. If she ever started collecting actively for the institution, she would not be amassing masterpieces in the spirit of the oil magnate Armand Hammer, who left the museum a trove rich in old master portraits and French Impressionist landscapes.

For starters this kind of material does not play to the current strengths of the Hammer, known for showing fresh-from-the-studio contemporary art. Also, she couldn't afford it.

"One mediocre post-Impressionist painting would blow our budget for 10 years," she said.

The same could be said of one stellar postwar painting. If a "museum-quality" Warhol painting of a car crash from 1963 can top \$70 million at Christie's and "museum-quality" paintings made this decade routinely exceed \$1 million, how is a midsize museum to compete in the market? Given the frenzied competition among private collectors, how can a new museum — or a museum newly focused on acquisitions — hope to build a decent collection?

Over the last two years Ms. Philbin and her team at the Hammer Museum have begun answering these questions firsthand as they try to build a first-rate contemporary art collection on a shoestring, starting with only \$600,000 in annual acquisition funds.

It's an interesting experiment. The museum has a talented group of curators. (One collector called them "incredibly dynamic and magnetic.") It is affiliated with the University of California, Los Angeles, home to one of the country's top art departments. It has considerable good will among arts experts, locally and abroad.

Now the Hammer is discovering how much that good will is worth in a marketplace where so many collectors are competing for the same artworks and so many museums are competing for the same collectors. Visitors can judge early results by checking out the "Hammer Contemporary Collection: Part Two" show, a sampling of recent acquisitions that runs through Aug. 12.

The process of collection building started in earnest two years ago, when Ms. Philbin hired Gary Garrels, then a curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, as her deputy director and chief curator and entrusted him with overseeing contemporary acquisitions.

When Mr. Garrels arrived, the Hammer had a few core collections under its umbrella, including some 100 paintings and drawings from Mr. Hammer and the numerous prints, drawings and rare books that make up the U.C.L.A. Granwald Center for the Graphic Art, a university study center. But in terms of contemporary art, the Hammer was operating more like a *kunsthal*, a temporary home for a constantly changing roster of exhibitions.

This model has a particular set of challenges, said Jill Medvedow, director of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. "With a *kunsthal*-type space, you have the risk of being viewed in many ways as a movie theater, only as good as what's currently on view," she said. "If you're trying to build an audience, interest, affection and investments, one thing that helps is to build a sense of attachment by giving visitors artworks they can fall in love with and return to again and again."

Ms. Medvedow has faced this problem herself, as her museum had no permanent collection until five years ago. At that point the board re-

Emphasizing drawings and local artists, the Hammer Museum tries to enhance its holdings.

solved to begin collecting judiciously, she said, "focusing on art and artists out of I.C.A.'s own exhibition history, starting with the 21st century." The institute now owns about 40 works, including installations by Cornelia Parker and Christian Jankowski, all received as donations.

The Hammer developed another strategy. Building on their own expertise and the Granwald Center's strengths, Ms. Philbin and Mr. Garrels chose to concentrate on drawings, photographs and works on paper, leaving the more expensive fields of painting and sculpture to play a supporting role. They are focusing on works made since 1945, with particular attention to the last decade, and showcasing artists from Southern California above other regions. (They decided, as a matter of policy, "not to buy straight from art schools," Mr. Garrels said.)

The goal is to be financially savvy "without sacrificing quality," said Ms. Philbin, who was previously head of the Drawing Center in New York. "Unless you have millions and millions of dollars at your disposal, the art market doesn't allow an institution to put together a noteworthy paintings and sculpture collection."

Mr. Garrels added: "Drawings can be closer to the artist's process, to their way of thinking and working through issues. And they're often the things that tend to get overlooked, so we have the chance to do something here that's distinctive."

The Hammer can thank Bill Gates for its annual acquisition budget, which was about \$600,000 last year and is expected to be closer to \$800,000 going forward. In 1994, a few years after Mr. Hammer's death, the museum put up for auction a gem from his collection: a 72-page scientific manuscript by Leonardo da Vinci covered with missings and drawings. It was called the Codex Leicester after one of its earliest owners, Thomas Coke, the first Earl of Leicester. Mr. Hammer renamed it the Hammer Codex. Now Mr. Gates presumably has naming rights: he bought it at Christie's for \$80 million.

Since then the yearly interest on that money has been split. Half has supported Hammer exhibi-



J. Emilio Flores for The New York Times

tions and collections. The other half was initially used to pay off a bank loan. When that loan was repaid last year, the money was freed up for acquisitions. In the future, Ms. Philbin hopes to use all of the interest for acquisitions, in keeping with industry guidelines on deaccessioning.

So far Hammer curators have used this fund to buy nearly 100 works, including a set of drawings by Raymond Pettibon, a light box photograph by Jeff Wall and photographs by Sharon Lockhart from her *Pink Flat* series of portraits. Recently Mr. Garrels set his sights on several artists in his current exhibition, "Eden's Edge." And since organizing her exhibition in the spring, he has been pursuing a Vija Celmins drawing. ("It's very high on our list and everybody knows it," he said. "There just isn't one available.")

Yet it's clear that a curator can't do all of this alone. The bulk of the acquisitions to date, nearly 500 pieces, have come from private collectors, who either donate holdings, buy works on behalf of the museum or buy through the museum's Collections Committee. Formed two years ago as part of the Board of Overseers, this

group has just started making its own purchases by pooling board dues to create a fund of about \$100,000 a year.

In April, after considering several options, the Collections Committee used this sum to buy a suite of 10 new drawings by Lari Pittman. "It was clear to everyone that this was an opportunity that might not come along again," Ms. Philbin said. "Lari is such an important figure, a father figure, in Los Angeles. And this is a very ambitious piece, a suite of drawings with the same power and presence as his paintings."

In other cases, as with the Lockhart photographs, a committee member brings work to the museum's attention. "The Collections Committee acts as a kind of sounding board for us," Mr. Garrels said. "They are also our eyes and ears. It's important to have supporters out there gleaming information, visiting studios, seeing shows."

Some of these supporters come from Hollywood. Members of the 23-member board include Peter Benedek and Jeremy Zimmer, both of United Talent Agency; Michael Rubel of Creative Artists Agency; George Freeman of William Morris; and the independent writer-director Phil Robinson. Having this concentration of industry types is no easy feat.

"L.A. is a really hard nut to crack," Ms. Philbin acknowledged. "What I'm told is that people in the industry feel that their wealth is fleeting." She describes cultural philanthropy in the city as no longer in its infancy, but still in its adolescence.

That's surely one reason the museum has cultivated major supporters outside California as well. The legendary New York collectors Wynn and Sarah Ann Kramarsky have given 60 drawings, including works by Sol LeWitt and Agnes Martin. The Aspen collectors Larry and Susan Marx, who have a second home here, have just rewritten their will to leave 64 works on paper to the museum. The promised gift includes drawings by Willem de Kooning, Brice Marden and Philip Guston, "things that we could never dream of buying," Ms. Philbin said.

Mr. Marx said the couple had many reasons for choosing the Hammer, starting with advice from a friend and fellow collector, Kent Logan. "He advised me early on: Just make sure wherever you give your collection, it's important to them," Mr. Marx recalled. "I think MoMA is a fabulous museum. But if we gave this to MoMA, it wouldn't be important to them."

He also simply likes the Hammer team and its commitment to drawings. When Mr. Garrels suggested that he buy an early Guston drawing to round out his collection, Mr. Marx e-mailed an image to the curator before writing the check.

Yet other collectors express doubt about the museum's focus on works on paper, wondering whether it's too narrow. One skeptic is Dean Valentine, a board member from Los Angeles. He began discussing the issue with Ms. Philbin

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with Mr. Philbin. "They got to be of doing a paper- are very attrac Valentine said. Bu "ugly" things. "I th per was too narrow

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Hammer Museum

