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## The Whitney Museum's New Home

By

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Curators at the Whitney Museum of American Art discuss their largest exhibition to date at their new downtown location, designed by architect Renzo Piano



OUTSIDE THE BOX | From left: The new eight-story Whitney Museum building designed by Renzo Piano overlooks the Hudson River; the Marcel Breuer building on Madison Avenue, a modest 85,000 square feet. *PHOTO: FROM LEFT: ED LEDERMAN; FRED W. MCDARRAH/GETTY IMAGES*

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From left: Carter E. Foster, Dana Miller, Donna De Salvo, Adam D. Weinberg and Scott Rothkopf in one of the soon-to-open galleries designed by architect Renzo Piano.

**FOR THE PAST YEAR** or so, four curators from the Whitney Museum of American Art have spent nearly every day poring over a dollhouse-size architectural model of the [museum's soon-to-open new home in New York City's Meatpacking District](#). The miniature walls hold tiny maquettes of famous artworks—a Jasper Johns taped here, a Jeff Koons stuck there. Despite the model's small scale, it represents the biggest puzzle this team has had to solve: an exhibition of more than 650 pieces of art selected from the Whitney's vast permanent collection, which will inaugurate the 200,000-square-foot, \$422 million building this May.

The museum's southern migration has garnered plenty of attention, especially given that architect Renzo Piano's neatly tailored, geometric design represents decades of effort to move out of the iconic yet odd Marcel Breuer-designed structure on Madison Avenue that housed the museum for nearly 50 years. But inside Piano's eight-story building, a quieter revolution is taking place. Called *America Is Hard to See* (a title originally borrowed from a Robert Frost poem), the show ranks as the largest by far since the

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founding of the institution 85 years ago by arts patron Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. It will also make a strong statement about the museum's desire to forge a new path between two poles: on the one hand, as a showcase for blue-chip holdings including paintings by Edward Hopper and Georgia O'Keeffe, and on the other, as a nexus for debate, sparked by such controversial fare as its Biennial.

This exhibit "is not going to be the cleanest, greatest hits," says Donna De Salvo, the Whitney's chief curator and deputy director, who joined the museum in 2004 after a stint at the Tate Modern. "That's not what the museum is about. And I don't think it's what my colleagues are about." She calls herself the "conductor" of a handpicked group: Dana Miller, the nurturing curator of the permanent collection; Carter E. Foster, the curator of the museum's drawings, known for his enthusiastic approach; and Scott Rothkopf, the associate director of programs, who curated the [museum's blockbuster Jeff Koons exhibit](#) last year.

The show they've created is not a comprehensive survey of American art history, but rather a thematic look at "overlapping narratives," says De Salvo, told through a selection from the 22,000 pieces in the Whitney's wide-ranging collection. In the process, some famous names got tossed and some were plucked from oblivion (sorry, Marcel Duchamp; hello, Judith Bernstein). The show purposefully and emphatically elevates the work of female artists and minorities. As a signature Whitney artist, Hopper may have the most pieces in the show, but the African-American painter Jacob Lawrence is also deeply represented, with a selection of paintings from his 1946 *War Series* on view. "We're not checking off boxes," says Rothkopf. "We are including all these voices because the story of American art becomes more complicated and more interesting."

"The team discovered works I had known of but hadn't realized how special they were," says Whitney director Adam D. Weinberg, who has led the museum since 2003, "as well as those by lesser-known people who are really interesting." By way of example of the former type, he points to *Number 1—1955*, a sculpture by Japanese-American artist Ruth Asawa, which had been in the collection for years; in the latter category, a 1974 photograph, *Decoy Gang War Victim*, by the West Coast Latino collective Asco.

While none of the curators was charged with a specific era, their individual expertise came in handy. "Carter has more prewar experience, so he took the lead there," says Rothkopf, a former *Artforum* editor whose "surgical" abilities De Salvo tapped to hone the most contemporary section of the show. Called "Course of the Empire," this portion reflects what Rothkopf calls our own "turbulent and uncertain times." It includes a Richard Serra print addressing the torture at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison and Elizabeth Peyton's portrait of the Obamas kissing.

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Similarly, Foster mined the collection's reserves of 1930s graphic anti-lynching prints. On view will be Harry Sternberg's 1935 piece *Southern Holiday*. "You're not going to see lynching at any other museum," Foster says. "We've never been told that we couldn't do something because of subject matter."

Meanwhile, the section on abstract expressionism was particularly challenging, because "the collection's very rich," notes De Salvo. There are 21 de Kooning paintings to choose from, as well as works by Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock.

As the curators sifted through more than 100 years of artworks, disagreements inevitably arose. "We all had to kill our darlings," says Foster. The team was split down the middle about a seemingly uncontroversial painting, George Bellows's 1910 winter landscape *Floating Ice*, but it made the final cut. (Although the painting is perhaps not Bellows's most explosive work, Weinberg notes that the wintry scene is similar to the sweeping views of the Hudson that visitors to the new Whitney will enjoy.)

Wherever there was something missing, the team was empowered to acquire it. "The thing about working so far ahead is that you can fill some gaps," says Miller, who has been at the Whitney since she first interned there in 1996. "Faith Ringgold wasn't in the collection at all, and we thought that was an oversight," she says, so the 84-year-old African-American artist's 1971 piece *Women Free Angela* was bought and added to the permanent collection.

"There were times when the Whitney missed out on great opportunities," adds Weinberg, who was thrilled that they were able to acquire a 1974 Jack Whitten abstraction, *Sorcerer's Apprentice*, that had once been shown at the museum but somehow never made it into the collection.

During the planning process, De Salvo also weighed in on the building's design. "It's a very unusual scenario in which the curatorial voice has been at the table from the beginning," says De Salvo, who's most excited about the flexibility afforded by the 18,000-square-foot, column-free fifth floor. It will be the go-to space for large temporary exhibitions like the upcoming Frank Stella show, co-curated by Weinberg.

Ultimately, though, architecture won't define what's on display in *America Is Hard to See*. Echoing a sentiment expressed by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney's granddaughter, Flora Miller Biddle, De Salvo says: "The Whitney is not a building. It's an idea."