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In defense of progressive deaccessioning

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Grace Stands Beside by Shinique Smith, installed at the Baltimore Museum of Art (until 3 January 2021).

In June, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., made an important acquisition. The work in question, *I See Red: Target* (1992) by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, is art-historically allusive, taking Jasper Johns as its primary reference, yet emotionally wrenching – a roughly anthropomorphic form drenched in blood-

red paint, with a target for a face. When the acquisition was announced, however, it was another fact that commanded attention. This was the first painting by a Native American to enter the National Gallery's collection.

While certainly a positive development in itself, this came as something of a shock. How could a museum that claims to represent America have failed so abjectly to consider the work of indigenous people? Smith herself was widely quoted as saying, 'On the one hand, it's joyful; we've broken that buckskin ceiling. On the other, it's stunning that this museum hasn't purchased a piece of Native American art.'

The episode epitomised a dynamic that is currently at play in the North American museum sector. While museums are working hard to diversify their collections, the weight of inherited bias can make such efforts seem absurdly inadequate. The quantity of art by white men sitting in permanent collections is overwhelming. Is attempting to right the balance a fool's errand? Perhaps museums should not set themselves up for failure. They should simply ensure parity in modern and contemporary acquisitions going forward, while also providing educational outreach and temporary exhibitions that represent a more inclusive vision.

Here in North America, several museums have decided they must do far more than that – that drastic action is required. In a strategy that might be called 'progressive deaccessioning', they have begun selling off high-value art, and putting the realised funds towards works by under-represented artists. The Baltimore Museum of Art, located in a Black majority city, has taken the lead in this. In 2018, the BMA sold seven works with the explicit intent to 'rewrite the postwar canon', as director Christopher Bedford put it. This year, having already committed to expending acquisition funds exclusively on art by women for one year, it will deaccession three further works, by Clyfford Still, Andy Warhol and Brice Marden.

Other prominent examples of progressive deaccessioning have included SFMOMA's sale of a Mark Rothko painting for \$50 million, in 2019, allowing them to buy works by Kay Sage, Frank Bowling, and Mickalene Thomas, among others.

(Ironically, senior curator Gary Garrels, who was heavily involved in this initiative, has recently resigned from the museum amid controversy over remarks he made about 'reverse discrimination'.) Last year, too, the Art Gallery of Ontario deaccessioned no fewer than 17 paintings by A.Y. Jackson, one of the Canadian landscape painters known as the Group of Seven – though this still left them with a strong representation of works by the artist. Again, the rationale was to diversify the collection, making it 'better reflect the people who live here', according to the AGO's spokesperson.



Qusuquzah, une très belle négresse (2011), Mickalene Thomas. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Katherine Du Tiel; © Mickalene Thomas/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

This year, two developments have given further impetus to the trend. First, as the pandemic brought financial distress to many institutions, the American

Association of Museum Directors relaxed its rules on restricted funds – including those raised from deaccessioning – allowing them to be applied to operating expenses. Institutions such as the Brooklyn Museum, already cash-strapped before Covid-19, immediately took advantage, sending a dozen paintings to auction to raise funds for the care of its collection. In this permissive atmosphere, it is probable that strategic rethinking of collections will become more commonplace. A second driver of change has been the Black Lives Matter movement. Over the summer, as monuments to Confederates and slave traders were being torn down in public squares, art sitting safely in storage has been reassessed too.

It was against this complex backdrop that museum director Elizabeth Dunbar and her colleagues at the Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, began to think about selling their Jackson Pollock – an idea of breathtaking boldness, in some ways, and a no-brainer in others. The Pollock was almost certainly the single most financially valuable work in the Everson’s collection. But that did not make it the most important work to the museum itself – that would most likely be Adelaide Alsop Robineau’s Scarab Vase of 1910, the jewel of the museum’s distinguished ceramics holdings.

Pollock’s Red Composition (1946), which came to the Everson in 1991, was arguably an anomaly within the collection, which is not particularly strong in Abstract Expressionism. The museum actually presented Joan Mitchell’s first solo museum exhibition in 1972, but lacked the funds it would have taken to buy a painting; Dunbar was determined not to let that kind of mistake happen again. Even as protestors marched past the Everson (it is sited in a historic Black neighbourhood, the 15th Ward, which was razed by developers in the 1960s), she began discussions with the foundation set up by the donors who had gifted the Pollock. After a process of internal review, including staff, trustees, and community stakeholders, the Everson decided to move ahead with the sale, putting part of the proceeds putting part of the proceeds into an endowment to support direct care of the collection, and part to an acquisition campaign focused on diversification.

Predictably, there was criticism – mainly from white men. Christopher Knight, in the LA Times, called the Everson’s decision ‘inexcusable’. In the Wall Street Journal, Terry Teachout, under the headline ‘An Art Museum Sells Its Soul’, claimed that the Pollock was one of the museum’s main draws (it was ‘a work sufficiently important to merit paying a visit to an out-of-the-way art museum of no particular distinction’, he wrote). In fact, to the extent that the Everson is a pilgrimage destination, it’s the I.M. Pei architecture and the ceramics that make it so. In any case, Dunbar and her colleagues are first and foremost thinking of the community in Syracuse, which constitutes the Everson’s primary audience; and, according to Dunbar, local responses have been extremely positive.

There are several arguments made against progressive deaccessioning. The first is that equity in collections is such a distant goal that there’s no point even trying to achieve it. Knight calculated that ‘the Everson would need to unload half of its collection for it to reflect the diversity of a city that is 45% nonwhite.’ Art historian Tyler Green, similarly, has said, ‘none of these sales fundamentally address these institutions’ histories of racism or sexism. They are attempts to elide a broader, deeper self-examination’. Against such objections, one might reasonably ask: if progressive deaccessioning doesn’t count as addressing problematic institutional histories, what would? It took generations for museums to establish themselves as bastions of white supremacy. No one believes that undoing this legacy will be either quick or easy. Surely we should not accept that sexism and racism are so entrenched that they cannot be uprooted? The only way to begin is to begin.

A second argument is that diversifying collections, while a worthy goal, should be paid for by trustees, not through high-profile art sales. This may sound persuasive – if you’ve never worked in a museum. If you have, it will probably provoke a bitter laugh. Directors and development officers are already raising money as fast as they can, a process that brings hazards of its own: potential conflicts of interest, the erosion of curatorial autonomy and, of course, dependence upon a class of elites who are themselves predominantly white men. (To see just how predominantly, check out the Instagram feed

@show_the_boardroom.) There's also the sheer scale of the art market as compared with private philanthropy. A single evening of sales held this June at Sotheby's, in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis, cleared more than \$360 million – more than the annual operating budget of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. For small regional museums like the Everson, transformative acquisition campaigns will always require resources greatly in excess of what can be raised. Equally, of course, institutions that turn to the market to improve their financial position are exposed to its vagaries; the Everson's Pollock went for a hammer price of \$12m, right at its low estimate.

One final argument against progressive deaccessioning – and perhaps the most convincing one – is that it results in important works being lost from public view. For the reasons just described, museums are not generally in the running when blue-chip art is offered at auction. Here too, there is an obvious rejoinder: the great majority of museum collections are in storage anyway. If a work will not see the light of day in the foreseeable future, and is well published both online and otherwise – which the process of deaccessioning itself tends to achieve – it's not clear what exactly the general public is losing when such a work enters private hands. True, external scholars may have less direct access to it in the future; but those same scholars might well agree that their own academic interests are less important than equity in our institutional collections.

Asma Naeem, chief curator at the Baltimore Museum of Art, goes still further: 'Just because a painting is hanging on the gallery walls,' she says, 'doesn't mean it should stay there. How often a work has been shown in the past does not necessarily measure the significance or quality of the object within an artist's oeuvre.' After all, previous exhibiting patterns have been subject to plenty of bias too. Naeem thus argues for a nuanced, contextual approach. Redundancy, one of the criteria most often cited in deaccessioning cases, is a key factor here; but so too is the set of narrative possibilities open to an institution. Ideally, museums would not all tell the same story (which is another aspect of diversification). Naeem argues that rather than subscribing to pre-existing, externally mandated and intractable standards of value, curators should

establish their own priorities: 'a definitive and consistent curatorial acquisitions roadmap that illustrates what is no longer relevant or significant'.

A corollary here is that deaccessioning is at least as demanding a curatorial process as acquisition. Both involve similar procedures (curatorial research, committee review and board approval). Critics seem to trust museums when they buy things, and are instinctively suspicious when they sell them; this betrays a dated conception of institutions as, effectively, places for hoarding. Indeed, in the past, museums were very much conceived as demonstrations of civic wealth and treasure houses of imperial conquest. To be sure, it is essential that institutions maintain their fundamental role as stewards of art, preserving works for future generations; this is why deaccessioning (for any reason) must always be undertaken with great care. Yet to some degree, rethinking museums for the future – 'decolonising' them, as the current phrase has it – probably does entail dismantling the legacy not only of specific acquisitions, but of acquisitiveness itself.

As if to embody all these ideas, the BMA has recently brought Shinique Smith's *Grace Stands Beside* to its galleries. The artist initially intended this work to be placed in a nearby park, on a plinth that had itself borne a great historical weight: the Confederate Soldiers and Sailors Monument. Installed in 1903, it was removed three years ago after being defaced with paint. Smith's work, which is swathed in vibrantly coloured fabrics – it could read as a shrouded neoclassical sculpture – borrows its open-ended title from an inscription on the decommissioned monument: 'Glory Stands Beside Our Grief.'

The city of Baltimore has not yet moved forward with Smith's proposal for the empty plinth, but the BMA stepped in, inviting her to display the work temporarily in its galleries as part of its year-long celebration of women's art (Fig. 1). The original meaning of the work – its memorialisation of the countless Black Americans left out of official public discourse – has only gained in relevance, given the events of the summer. Now that it is in the museum, it can also be read as a meditation on absence: an allusion to all the things that have not been brought here, to be catalogued and preserved and displayed.

As progressive deaccessioning proliferates across the museum sector over the next few years – which it is almost sure to – we must hope that it is done deliberately, thoughtfully, and with utmost rigour. But let's also keep this in mind: many of the great works of art history were never considered for museum acquisition, because of the blind spots of previous generations. As they struggle with this inheritance, curators will doubtless make mistakes. Hopefully, continuing business as usual will not be one of them.