

ART & DESIGN

Becoming Modern: The Met's Mission at the Breuer Building

By **DEBORAH SOLOMON** NOV. 25, 2015

It is probably revealing that Sheena Wagstaff, who was brought to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to ramp up its presence in contemporary art, is about to make her debut at the museum's new Breuer building with an exhibition of an artist who has been dead for more than 20 years. Nasreen Mohamedi is a beloved if little-known modernist who is sometimes called the Indian Agnes Martin, a reference to her penchant for pristine grids.

Ms. Wagstaff, a former chief curator at the Tate Modern, arrived from London four years ago to assume the influential position of chairwoman for the Met's new department of Modern and contemporary art. On March 18, the museum will unveil the Met Breuer, better known as the former home of the Whitney Museum of American Art. The Met's annexation of the building prompted an initial burst of skepticism: The Met might seem to have enough to do collecting and clarifying 5,000 years of recorded history, without becoming yet another showplace for the art of the last three minutes.

"I think the exciting thing," Ms. Wagstaff said, in her dramatically

accented British voice, “is that American audiences will get to know that there are these extraordinary things happening in different cities, even in places like Kochi-Muziris, which is in the middle of nowhere.”

Later, when I looked up Kochi-Muziris online, a video popped up that featured Ms. Wagstaff sitting outdoors last year at an art biennial in India’s coastal state of Kerala. She was in a white blouse, her long hair woven into a braid, her outlines crisp against a summery backdrop of green foliage. “It’s a very important biennial,” she announces to the camera with the confidence of a missionary. “If anyone is watching this, you have to get here.”

In seeking to define what the Met will be as a modern art presence in coming years, it seems safe to say it will differ from its famous New York neighbors. It will not be the Whitney (where we fell in love with our first Edward Hoppers and Georgia O’Keeffes). It will not duplicate the Museum of Modern Art (in part because it’s too late to play catch up with MoMA’s peerless holdings of Picasso & Company). It won’t be the ever-expanding Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (still trying to build in Helsinki and Abu Dhabi) or the New Museum (a kunsthalle without much of a collection).

Yet, the Met’s Modern department might turn into the Tate of Fifth Avenue, with all that that implies about the British fascination with post-colonial cultures and a desire to dismantle Western-centric versions of art history.

“My work at the Tate Modern, along with my colleagues, too, was very much about re-addressing the Western canon, re-addressing the idea of what modernism actually means, and broadening and expanding that scope,” said Ms. Wagstaff, a trim, bespectacled woman of 59.

Within Ms. Wagstaff’s own department at the Met, where she oversees a staff of 10 curators, there have been many departures and arrivals. She has dismissed longtime art historians schooled in the art of European Modernism while creating such new positions as a curator of South Asian contemporary

art; a curator of Latin American contemporary art; and a curator of contemporary Middle Eastern, North African and Turkish art.

To be sure, we all want to be cognizant of other cultures and sensitive to the differences among us. Yet international biennialism has become a fashion like any other, and you don't have to be a cultural alarmist to wonder whether American audiences will warm to the Met's global mission.

"That plays in London; it doesn't play in America, because America was made in an entirely different way," said Sean Scully, the Dublin-born American painter who was honored with a major exhibition at the Met in 2006. "It hasn't colonized two-thirds of the globe, like the British did."

Ms. Wagstaff's office is on the mezzanine of the Modern wing of the Met, in an oblong room with blond-wood shelves. The place looks a bit anonymous, perhaps because the walls are bare, and there are no knickknacks or photographs. When I arrived, she was visibly tense. "No one has done a profile of me ever," she volunteered. Not even during her productive 14 years at the Tate? She shook her head. "They do profiles of the top chaps," she said.

Asked where one might find some biographical information on her, she joked, "I have a Duane Reade card, so they have some information on me, I am sure." Then she pulled out two stapled sheets, a "mini-C.V.," as she called it. It indicated, among other things, that she attended college at the University of East Anglia, in Norwich, England, and traveled to New York in 1982 as a fellow in the Whitney Independent Study Program.

Born in Colchester, England, the daughter of a career army officer, she was raised in Malta and Cyprus. An early job as an assistant to the director of the Oxford Museum of Modern Art landed her in the office of a rising star, Nicholas Serota. In 1998, Mr. Serota was named director of the Tate Britain, and Ms. Wagstaff was hired as head of exhibitions and displays. In 2001, she moved to the other side of the Thames River, to the Tate Modern, which had opened in the defunct Bankside Power Station and become a sensation almost

overnight.

Thomas P. Campbell, director of the Met, who is also British, came to his choice of Ms. Wagstaff after bumping into her at various international art fairs. He had begun his career as a scholar of renaissance tapestries and, by his own admission, felt a bit out of his depth when faced with the task of a hire in contemporary art. He was impressed to learn about her work at the Tate Modern, where, he said, “she was very actively engaging with these more international investigations.” She was “looking at stuff in the Middle East and what was going on in Asia.”

Ms. Wagstaff’s husband, Mark Francis, is also in the art world. He served as the founding director of the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, and, for most of the ’90s, the couple and their two children resided in the States. Nowadays, the children are grown and live in London, as does Mr. Francis, who is a director of the Gagosian Gallery there. He and Ms. Wagstaff have a fashionably complicated trans-Atlantic marriage. She lives in an apartment on the Upper East Side and gets to London when she can.

When the Met Breuer opens to the public, expect to find, in addition to the Nasreen Mohamedi show, “Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible” — a sprawling, concept-driven, historical extravaganza with 195 objects by 127 artists (at last count) tethered to the question: When is a work of art finished? “To finish a work is to kill it,” Picasso declared, providing more than a small intimation of the non finito aesthetic that became so integral to modern art.

“It’s 550 years’ worth of art,” Ms. Wagstaff said, describing the show. “And that extends from Van Eyck and Titian up until — the most recent work is a work by Urs Fischer from this year.”

Urs Fischer? It was impossible to ignore the fact that the Swiss-born sculptor is represented by the Gagosian Gallery, where Ms. Wagstaff’s husband works.

Museums, in principle, are scholarly institutions removed from the seductions of the marketplace, and Ms. Wagstaff's ties to the Gagosian Gallery could make the Met vulnerable to charges of favoritism. When the museum acquires or exhibits the work of an artist represented by Gagosian, the gesture is likely to boost the person's prestige and value. But those who have worked alongside her emphasize her scrupulousness in observing rules regarding conflict of interest. "She was very careful to draw the line," recalled Dorothy Lichtenstein, the widow of the pop artist **Roy Lichtenstein**, whose retrospective was Ms. Wagstaff's last show at the Tate Modern.

"Sheena said: 'Let's not get involved with commercial galleries. Let's not invite them to the meetings,'" Ms. Lichtenstein said. Ms. Wagstaff, in an email, noted that the Urs Fischer loan "was handled with the artist himself and then negotiated with **Sadie Coles, London**," another gallery. "Gagosian was not involved in any way."

Since arriving at the Met, Ms. Wagstaff has established herself as someone whose taste leans toward conceptual art. Three Met exhibitions listed on her C.V. as "personally curated" were commissions for the museum's famously scenic Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Roof Garden. The space is probably the most dramatic site for sculpture in New York, yet Ms. Wagstaff's commissions do not aspire to be sculptures at all.

Her first commission, in 2013, went to **Imran Qureshi**, a Pakistani artist based in Lahore. It had the misfortune of opening in the wake of the bombing at the Boston Marathon. When you stepped outdoors, onto the roof, dark-red paint seemed to be spattered everywhere. It was easy to miss the allusions to 16th-century Mughal painting and feel spooked by intimations of spilled blood. The installation, the critic Ken Johnson noted in *The New York Times*, "isn't adjusted to the complicated social and cultural context of the United States, which is vastly different from that of the Middle East and Pakistan."

Last May, **Pierre Huyghe**, a French conceptual artist who looms large on

the European scene, unveiled a piece that was so subtle that some asked where it was even when they were standing in front of it. It involved a fish tank stocked with lampreys as well as an alteration to the terrace's paving stones: A handful of tiles were removed to expose the soil underneath.

When I confided my reservations to Mr. Campbell, saying the piece was short on visual energy, he replied: "It's very conceptual. It's too conceptual for some. But I think it's great. It's been fascinating watching the weeds grow up on the rooftop over the last six months."

In addition to organizing temporary exhibitions, Ms. Wagstaff is charged with the not-small task of enlarging the museum's patchy collection of 20th-century art. There is also the issue of where to house it. Now that Leonard A. Lauder has promised the Met an extraordinary gift of 81 Cubist masterworks, the museum is rethinking the Lila Acheson Wallace Wing, whose awkwardly jutting spaces have been criticized since they opened in 1987. The British architect David Chipperfield will be designing the replacement, for an estimated cost of at least \$600 million. The money has not been entirely secured, but new galleries, Mr. Campbell said, "will be a major incentive to collectors." In the meantime, the Met's annexation of the Breuer building is an eight-year agreement. Would Ms. Wagstaff like to see the Met keep the Breuer building beyond 2023? "I don't know," she replied. "I mean, I honestly don't know."

Adding to the uncertainty is the continuing drama of staff changes. When Ms. Wagstaff started at the Met, there were four accomplished art historians with the title of associate curators. All have since left and were required to sign confidentiality agreements forbidding them from speaking to the news media. The most recent departure, that of veteran curator Marla Prather, occurred quietly last summer. Ms. Prather had been working on an important show of works by African-American artists from the South, a gift to the Met by the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. Ms. Prather will see the show to completion.

Asked about the staff changes, Ms. Wagstaff said: “There are good curators, there are great curators, and a lot of mediocre curators. In order to create a really great program, you need great curators. That’s what I am anticipating the Breuer program will reflect.”

Ms. Wagstaff’s mission probably has not been abetted by her personal manner. She is often described by colleagues as brusque and imperious, and I kept hearing that she fails to return messages, even from art-world biggies. “Her phone doesn’t have outgoing service,” jokes Peter Schjeldahl, the art critic of *The New Yorker*, adding that he was surprised when he tried to contact Ms. Wagstaff to arrange an initial tête-à-tête and never heard back.

In her defense, the Canadian photographer Jeff Wall, said: “I think Americans tend to find British people kind of aloof. She also probably gets a lot of emails that don’t need an answer.”

Moreover, she does have more than a few shows that need her attention.

Her curator Ian Alteveer, for one, is focused on the art of Kerry James Marshall, a prominent figurative painter from Birmingham, Ala., whose work redresses the absence of black subjects in Western art. The survey arrives at the Met Breuer in about a year, after opening first at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago.

Ms. Wagstaff is also looking ahead to May and the next rooftop project. For the honor, she has tapped Cornelia Parker, a widely admired British sculptor known for installations in which shrapnel and other material are suspended in midair, as if caught in the act of exploding.

When news of the choice got out, it inspired sighs among some observers. The Met has yet to give a solo rooftop show to an American woman artist. Barbara Rose, the eminent art historian, sent an email: “You mean there is NO American artist good enough??? Maya Lin and Sarah Sze for openers are so much more interesting. And Ursula von Rydingsvard, etc. etc. etc.”

It was a fair question, and one that I posed to Mr. Campbell, the director.

“You tell your American curators to stop being such whiners,” he snapped.
“This is a very competitive institution. You succeed by being good.”

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