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Space Exploration, Conducted on a Spiral



The Shapes of Space

This exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum takes its title from Alyson Shotz's curtain of plastic lenses, displayed in the rotunda.

"The Shapes of Space," the Guggenheim Museum's spirited if sometimes disjointed display of works from its collection, might almost be titled "Welcome to the 21st Century." Its accomplishments are several:

ROBERTA SMITH

ART REVIEW

It puts on view many of the museum's latest acquisitions. While a 1913 Mondrian is the show's earliest work, nearly half were acquired after 2000.

It allows two young assistant curators and one curatorial assistant — Ted Mann, Nat Trotman and Kevin Lotery — to spread their wings, under the supervision of Nancy Spector, the museum's chief curator.

It shows the Guggenheim, under Lisa Dennison, its director of two years, trying to look like a museum and make active use of its collection, rather than functioning mostly as a kunsthalle dedicated to traveling blockbusters.

And finally, it offers a good argument for expansion of the local kind — not in Bilbao, Berlin or Abu Dhabi, but right here in New York.

That may be beyond the museum's reach right now. But as a testament to what might be called the Thomas Krens legacy — he will be remembered as a builder of museums who failed to build where his museum needed it most — this is partly a depressing show, symptomatic of the kind of museological missteps that have become par for the course in New York. But let's not go there. Let's just say I sometimes found myself wondering how various works might look on level ground, as opposed to in the museum's sloping spiral, and with fair amounts of space.

There's a healthy vitality to this array of American and European works on the theme of space — a central issue to all art, but especially modern — and it raises worthwhile questions about the changing nature of museums, even if some of the answers are more palatable than others. It points to what might be called festivalist collecting: the acquisition of large, crowd-pleasing artworks that are entertaining and irresistible on a superficial level. It also reminds us that such works offer outstanding photo-ops.

"The Shapes of Space" runs through Sept. 5 at the Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street: (212) 423-3500.

The show opens on the rotunda floor with "The Shape of Space," Alyson Shotz's immense shimmering curtain of plastic lenses, hand-cut and stapled together, which is the source of the show's title. From afar it suggests a giant wind chime, but mainly it is a giant magnet for cellphone cameras. Dividing and multiplying its surroundings, it provides tiny, glimmering, beveled views of the museum's rings, Central Park, an apartment building, traffic. It even projects its own visible shield, a second layer of floating reflections that seems solid but is not.

Next comes Piotr Uklanski's "Untitled (Dance Floor)," which is in fact a dance floor: an eye-popping grid of flashing light, colors and patterns synchronized to various pop tunes of the disco and rap variety. This work was better out in the world, in its original incarnation as the floor of Passerby, the bar Gavin Brown opened in the front part of his gallery when it was on West 15th Street. According to the label, "it radically subverts the normal functions and patterns of behavior" of the museum, which is to say that it contributes to a certain mall-like atmosphere. Still, it's not often that you can look at a Mondrian while listening to Missy Elliott.

(excerpt)