

Release Date: April 16, 2010

National Gallery of Art Acquires Works by McCracken, Paik, Torres-García

Photographs, Drawings, and Prints by Woodman, Taylor, Gober, and Ligon also Acquired



Nam June Paik
American, born South Korea, 1932–2006
Ommah, 2005
one-channel video installation on 19-inch LCD monitor, silk robe
Gift of the Collectors Committee
Photograph by G. Orona

At its annual meeting in late March, the Collectors Committee of the National Gallery of Art made possible the acquisition of *Black Plank* (1967) by John McCracken (b. 1934), a rare black early plank in pristine condition, and *Ommah* (2005) by Nam June Paik (1932–2006), a moving reflection on his Korean heritage and his last work of video sculpture. Concurrently, the Gallery accepted one additional gift from Victoria and

Roger Sant: *Untitled Composition* (1929) by Joaquín Torres-García (1874–1949), an important work of Latin American modernism.

"This year, the Collectors Committee's selections brought the Gallery two important firsts: its first work of video art by Nam June Paik, one of the founders of that medium, and its first work of sculpture by John McCracken, one of the leading figures of minimal art," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "We are very grateful to the Collectors Committee, which enables the Gallery to continually enhance its holdings of contemporary art, and to Gallery president Victoria Sant and her husband Roger for the Gallery's first painting by Torres-García."

The Collectors Committee discretionary fund for photographs, drawings, and prints supported the acquisition of three photographs by Francesca Woodman (1958–1981): *Caryatid, New York (Study for Temple Project), New York* (1980); *Untitled, Rome* (1977–1978); and *Untitled, Providence, Rhode Island* (1975–1978); two drawings by Al Taylor (1948–1999): *Untitled (Can Study)* (1994) and *Untitled (Floaters)* (1998); a set of ten lithographs by Glenn Ligon (b. 1960): *Runaways* (1993); and a photolithograph on newsprint by Robert Gober (b. 1954): *Untitled* (1991).

***Black Plank* by John McCracken**

Black Plank is the first work by the artist to enter the collection, engaging not only with the Gallery's strong holdings of minimalist work, including pieces by Donald Judd, Carl Andre, Robert Morris, Fred Sandback, Anne Truitt, James Turrell, and Larry Bell, but also with paintings by Barnett Newman, whose "zips" helped inspire the planks, and with the pioneers of abstraction before him.

McCracken is a unique figure among minimalists. Though he is often grouped with the "light and space" artists who formed the West Coast branch of the movement for his interest in vivid color and polished surfaces, his signature achievement, the "planks" that he invented in 1966 and that he still makes today, have the tough simplicity and singularity of New York minimalism. McCracken notes that his planks bridge sculpture (identified with the floor) and painting (identified with the wall), adding that in so doing they bridge the physical and the mental.

McCracken's first planks were hollow plywood structures sprayed with paint, but he found that over time the grain began to show through. His solution was to add a layer of fiberglass over the plywood and to apply pigmented resin for its intense color and high sheen. Despite their polished surfaces, for McCracken the planks have otherworldly "personalities" owing to their different colors and dimensions. He recalls "an ancient Egyptian portrait of Chepren, in black diorite."

***Ommah* by Nam June Paik**

Created in 2005, the year before the artist's death, *Ommah* ("mother" in Korean) is his last video work of video sculpture, a genre that he helped to invent in the early 1960s. The first work of video art by Paik to enter the Gallery's collection, it joins three works on paper by the artist.

A traditional Korean robe or *hanbok* hangs suspended from a stick of bamboo. The diaphanous silk provides a screen on which images on an LCD TV monitor can be seen. The monitor plays a program lasting several minutes and looping continuously. Three Korean-American girls, dressed in their own traditional costumes, dance, play ball, beat a drum, and ride in a toy car. They are carefree but choreographed by Paik. The background imagery includes close-up views of early video games, and material from *Global Groove*, the video Paik made for WNET-TV in 1974. All are manipulated using a version of the color video synthesizer Paik invented with Shuya Abe around 1970. The music includes ambient sounds of the studio, both straight and processed, and snippets from Paik's own experimental music tapes of the 1950s.

This cruciform work appears stable and iconic, but our activity before it is crucial: viewers might move side to side or even peek around the robe for a better view. Paik attacked with gusto the passivity that he sensed early television imposed on viewers. Through endless play with the medium, which he eviscerated and recomposed, he reclaimed it as an expressive, democratic tool.

***Untitled Composition* by Joaquín Torres-García**

Untitled Composition was bought directly from the artist by his good friend, the sculptor Jacques Lipchitz, soon after it was made, and it has remained with Lipchitz's heirs. Its

acquisition brings the Gallery its first painting by the artist (it joins a 1933 drawing titled *Port of Uruguay*).

Torres-García's paintings expand the grid of high modernism to include pictographs and symbols exhibiting a remarkable touch—subtle but direct, playful but profound. By 1929, the year of this work, the artist was already 55 years old, with a long career behind him. *Untitled Composition* is one of a few works from that year in which Torres-García arrived at his mature style. His allegiance to De Stijl is evident in the vertical-horizontal grid and the restriction of the palette to the three (muted) primaries. The articulation of the grid through delicately layered colors, however, is his own, as are the symbols filling it. They embody what Torres-García would call *Universal Constructivism*, proposing a harmony between the realms of the intellect (represented here by the triangle and clock), the emotions (the house), and the earthy, natural world (the fish and elephant). The artist expanded this system to include pre-Columbian elements with his move back to Montevideo, Uruguay, his birthplace, in 1934, but he remained faithful to its basic outlines for the rest of his career.

In Uruguay, Torres-García shook up the academic establishment and diffused modernism through the Grupo Arturo and his Taller Torres-García, laying the groundwork for the explosion of abstract art in postwar Latin America. He was also influential in New York, where a posthumous exhibition at Sidney Janis in 1950 was admired by Barnett Newman and no doubt influenced Adolph Gottlieb and Louise Nevelson. More broadly, his fascination with the compartmentalization of signs has its legacy in works by Jasper Johns, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and others.

Photographs, Drawings, and Prints

In her short but impressive career, the American photographer Francesca Woodman (1958–1981) made a remarkable series of portraits and self-portraits. In her first works, such as *Untitled, Providence, Rhode Island* (1975–1978), she consciously explored earlier art, mining yet also subverting the sexually charged nature of mythological subjects such as Leda and the Swan. In self-portraits made soon thereafter, such as *Untitled, Rome* (1977–1978), Woodman utilized both light and movement to create an almost ethereal presence, simultaneously revealing and concealing herself, subjecting

herself to the gaze of the camera but deflecting it at the same time.

Her most ambitious work, *The Temple Project* (1980), presents Woodman and a few friends dressed and posed as caryatids—the sculpted female figures that serve as an architectural support and the Greek term for the maidens of the goddess Artemis. In *Caryatid, New York (Study for Temple Project), New York* (1980), Woodman displays the female figure in a far bolder and more direct manner than in any of her previous work. Yet once again the figure hides her face from our view; she is the subject of the photograph but she remains mutable—unsettled and impossible to fix. These are the first works by Francesca Woodman to enter the Gallery's collection.

Al Taylor's *Untitled (Can Study)* (1994) and *Untitled (Floaters)* (1998) demonstrate that the humblest of subjects—lowly tin cans and fishermen's floaters—can occasion magnificent drawings that explore space, volume, and shadow. Like Marcel Duchamp, Taylor was heavily invested in shadows, which assume fully autonomous roles in the two drawings acquired.

Glenn Ligon's *Runaways* series (1993) consists of ten lithographs based on "run-away slave" ads published in 18th- and 19th-century newspapers. Without disclosing his intentions, Ligon asked friends to describe him, subsequently inserting their observations into the format of the runaway ads. Each friend's account differs somewhat, underscoring the fluid confines of identity.

An untitled photolithograph by Robert Gober (1991) for the journal *Parkett* simulates a page from the October 4, 1960, edition of the *New York Times*. Mixed in among pieced-together wedding announcements and gruesome news items that defy belief, Gober inserted a fabricated story about the artist's own death-by-drowning at the age of six, exploding the myth of the safe and nurturing home. He brought the story still closer to home by carefully hand-painting two coffee rings—the inevitable domestic mishap—onto the page.

Collectors Committee

The Collectors Committee has made possible the acquisition of more than 300 works of art since the committee was formed in 1975. Approximately half of these acquisitions

have been works by living artists. Founding benefactor Paul Mellon asked Ruth Carter Stevenson, chair of the Gallery's board of trustees from 1993 to 1997, to be the first chair of the Collectors Committee. Denise Saul and Barry Berkus, both major collectors of 20th-century art, recently began their term as co-chairs of the Collectors Committee. Berkus, who resides in Santa Barbara, is the founder and president of B3 Architects and Berkus Design Studio. Saul, a New York resident, is active in cultural organizations and is a teacher. Roselyne Swig and John Pappajohn are the outgoing Collectors Committee co-chairs.

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General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets along Constitution Avenue NW and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. With the exception of the atrium and library, the galleries in the East Building will be closing gradually beginning in July 2013 and will remain closed for approximately three years for Master Facilities Plan and renovations. For specific updates on gallery closings, visit www.nga.gov/renovation (<http://www.nga.gov/renovation>) .

For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's website at www.nga.gov. Follow the Gallery on Facebook at www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt and on Twitter at twitter.com/ngadc.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

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