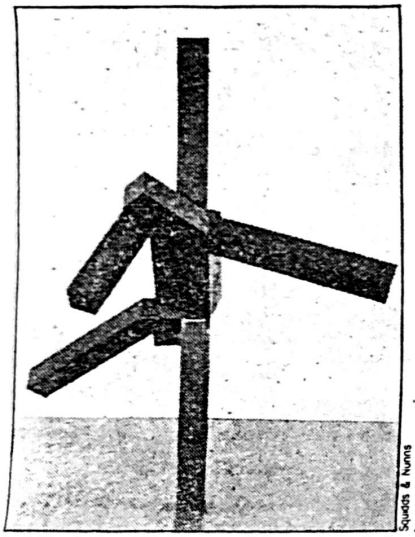
MoCA exhibit a tribute to Barry Lowen's 'eye' for art



Squidds & Nunns

Joel Shapiro's untitled bronze stick man is part of "The Barry Lowen Collection" on exhibit at MoCA.

By Hunter Drohojowska

There is a lot of rhetoric these days about the collector's eye, as in the complimentary observation, "he has a great eye," or the nasty crack, "he has no eye."

As defined by art critics and professionals, an "eye" will choose the essential and superb from among many examples of an artist's work. Alfred Barr, founder of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, succeeded in this to a remarkable extent. Just compare their Picasso collection to those in other museums.

Among art collectors of recent stripe, who have started buying since the boom of the 1960s, an "eye" means getting to a young artist's studio and buying promising works before the prices start to soar. It means living the life of art and being involved with living artists.

The collection of paintings and sculpture that the late Barry Lowen bequeathed to the L.A. Museum of Contemporary Art, on view through Aug. 10, is evidence of an original and perspicacious "eye." From the first gallery hung with two paintings by Frank Stella and one by Cy Twombly to the last room filled with paintings by the lesser known Mark Innerst, Richard Bosman and Peter Drake, the exhibition is a testimonial to the powers of such keen observation.

Some say an "eye" is a little like talent — you either have it or you don't. But even without the talent from birth for knowing what is special in a work of art, a collector who dedicates himself to hard work and scholarship may still become a connoisseur, like Barry Lowen.

Lowen, a television executive with means, but hardly a multimillionaire, bought his first piece, a kinetic sculpture, 15 years ago. Although he kept that sculpture for sentimental reasons, subsequent purchases came and went as he carved his way toward his current collection.

"At first, I didn't relate to or understand minimal or abstract expressionist art," he said in a 1983 interview. "The only painting I liked was Wyeth's 'Christina's World.'"

This is hard to believe of the man considered a guru by many L.A. collectors. But Lowen began by collecting California art, then photorealism. Gradually, he was seduced by abstract minimalism of the 1970s and the intellectual, conceptually based figurative art of the last decade.

Lowen was known among art dealers as a shrewd businessman when it came to trading a lesser work for a more substantial example of the same artist's work, and for jettisoning artists along the way. The result is a "personal" collection. Art professionals frequently resort to that adjective derogatorily when referring to eccentrics who display every last knickknack and who pride themselves on never selling a thing. But Lowen's collection is personal in the best sense, in that he constantly honed and refined toward a goal only he had in mind.

While there are many big names in this collection, he was not one who ticked them off a laundry list of the acceptable modern masters.

The degree to which Lowen understood the intentions of the artists he collected is obvious in the exhibition installation. Before he died last September, he mapped out the positions of some 60 works by 38 artists. Visitors float through a critically considered 20-year history, beginning with the Stellas and the Twombly, which are about the process of drawing, to the severe planes of saturated color of Ellsworth Kelly, the evanescent nets of Agnes Martin, the delicious surfaces of Brice Marden, the slab of steel of Richard Serra, the boxes of Donald Judd, the blocks and stones of Carl Andre, and the geometric puzzles of Robert Mangold. These rooms of minimal art reveal a collector who understood sculptors who abandoned the pedestal, painters who eliminated imagery. But what separated Lowen from the other collectors was an insistence on pushing ahead, rather than remaining with the established stars of a single movement. Lowen looked at art critically and in the late '70s began to collect a new generation of artists who leaned toward representation. Yet, he selected those he found to be evolving from the tenets of minimalism.

For instance, the show includes two formidable, splashy paintings by Susan Rothenberg, who is called a New Image painter and is known for her early pictures of horses. Yet, the artist says she chose her equine imagery for formal reasons, because the horse compositionally "divides right." Scott Burton's red, blue and yellow stacked cube sculpture may function as furniture but it also alludes to the formal properties of *De Stijl*. Joel Shapiro's stick men are composed of rectangular blocks that could make up a minimal sculpture. Neil Jenney's "Friend and Foe?" could be a minimal wash of blue but for the two tiny figures of a swimming dog and shark.

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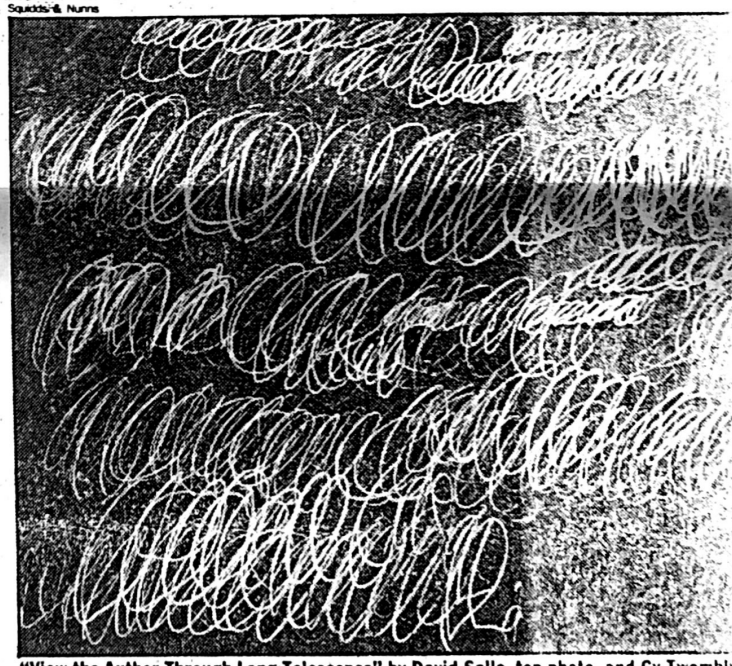

"View the Author Through Long Telescopes" by David Salle, top photo, and Cy Twombly's squiggles are included in the current exhibit at the Temporary Contemporary of paint sculpture that the late Barry Lowen bequeathed to the Los Angeles Museum of Contempo

Herald art critic Christopher Knight, in his essay for the exhibition catalog, notes the connections Lowen saw between the seemingly disparate fields of late Minimalism and the aggressively figurative art of the 1980s. This is especially true of David Salle, who often labors under the misleading label of Neo-expressionist. Led by his famous "eye," Lowen bought Salle's paintings in his studio before the now successful artist had ever shown with Mary Boone. Salle's diptych of a golfer and a fashion illustration, "View the Author Through Long Telescopes," sets up a mnemonic connection to the blue-gray Mardin diptych "Fass" only a gallery decade away.

Lowen's "eye" brings a great gift t Not only is the collection remarkab sive, even prescient, it provides a historical continuation to the collecti from the 1950s and 1960s that the bought from Count Giuseppe P another collector with a great eye.

If other Angelenos see these coll role models, and find themselves s generous, MoCA may achieve its sou "world-class status" after all.

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly abo the Herald.