“Sixty Years of Collecting,” a two-semester exhibition at the University Museum of Contemporary Art (UMCA) at UMass Amherst, showcases 112 works from the museum’s permanent art collection.

To some visitors, descending the concrete plazas, steps and ramps of 1960s Brutalist architecture leading to the Fine Arts Center’s entrance may recall academic fortresses and student protests. To younger ones, it’s a skateboard park. Although backpacks must stay outside, inside around the corner hangs Ryan McGinness’s silkscreened skateboard, lush with vegetation, and Keith Haring’s low-slung aluminum pyramid shimmers with teal and gold pictographs, beckoning to all ages.

On an early October afternoon, moments of stillness and bursts of color draw me through the museum, past frequent doublings, folding, mirroring and reversals. Alison Saar’s sewn lithograph, a flip-flop image of an African and a white woman seemingly rooted to each other’s breasts, comes back to mind when later viewing a print by her mother, Betye Saar, of two women face-to-face. The text “forward and back,” superimposed over Annette Lemieux’s folding image of soldiers marching in opposite directions reads as a split mirror image, thus enacting its own simultaneous march forward and back.

A pitch-black screen print by Andy Warhol glitters with diamond-dust, doubly seducing us with its dim outlines of ladies’ high heeled shoes. Dorothea Rockburne’s pure white paper rectangle on the wall opposite has been folded, inked with white paint, and run through a press. It brandishes its scoring, facets and buckles as significant marks inherent in its material.

Roni Horn twins her own apparently identical “before” and “after” photographs to indicate the interval of a geyser’s eruption. Next to Carrie Mae Weems’ photograph of a woman confronting the long-inhabited landscape of Rome’s “eternal city,” Kwezi Naledi documents a South African village half-built but never populated. And a pair of large monochromatic lithographs by Jasper Johns and his former love, Robert Rauschenberg, oppose leaden murk to light, air and speed. I am beyond charmed.

The University’s teaching collection grew from a small cache in 1962, when drawings by Tom Wesselmann and Claes Oldenburg were easily affordable. By 1975, the works on paper had expanded to include prints, drawings and photographs. Museum Director Loretta Yarlow called it, “3,800 hidden treasures. It’s local, regional, national and international art. We bring artists

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FEATURED EXHIBITION

60 YEARS OF COLLECTING:
AN ANNIVERSARY
EXHIBITION CELEBRATING
THE UMCA PERMANENT
ART COLLECTION

UNIVERSITY MUSEUM OF
CONTEMPORARY ART
UNIVERSITY OF
 MASSACHUSETTS,
AMHERST
FINE ARTS CENTER
151 PRESIDENTS DRIVE
AMHERST,
MASSACHUSETTS

THROUGH DECEMBER 11,
2022
REOPENING FEBRUARY 14
THROUGH MAY 14, 2023

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from around the world often for first-time exhibitions, and we also reach out to audiences on a global level.”

Yarlow praised the crisp geometric constructions in primary hues by Venezuelan sculptor Raphael Jesus Soto, across from the museum’s entrance. When first researching the collection, she’d been amazed to discover five sculptures and several prints by this major 20th century artist. “He’s one of the earliest kinetic artists. MoMA has large scale sculptures of his, and here’s something at this museum that’s never been on view here in our community!”

[The following interview with the Museum Director has been lightly edited for clarity.]

ELIZABETH MICHELMAN (EM): I feel a particular visual sensibility throughout this exhibition. Did you put individuals in charge of different rooms, or was it teamwork all the way?

LORETTA YARLOW (LY): It’s my vision, but I have a great group of people working with me. My staff and I are four and a half people. In the North Teaching Gallery, we turn the space over to grad students from different disciplines who curate from the collection and find a theme — currently Transportive Art. We have interns as well as student educators who get course credit. They get to see what large-scale museums do, but here on a smaller scale. This is my first opportunity in my UMass history to really think about this collection. Up till now I’ve left the collection curation to grad students and local artists. I felt this was my chance to present my point of view as to what this museum’s collection is all about. It’s eight exhibitions in one large exhibition. I found thematic and formal threads and interwove them throughout.

Since I arrived, I’ve felt we’ve got to share it and care for it. This was my moment of letting it be known what amazing works are hidden away. We need to keep it up for a full academic year so we can do a robust educational program. If we never ever did another temporary exhibition, we could just stay with this collection, because we are hoping to grow it.

I want new interpretations. That’s what a teaching museum is all about — for people to bring a new understanding to art that they thought were household names. Andy Warhol, he’s in the Pop Art section; I also put him in the art and politics and...
photography sections. How many people know he was very vocal in the Civil Rights movement with his images? He was a major photographer, keeping the camera around him at all times. He photographed a lot of The Factory people in their drag costumes. They could have been arrested back then. I mean, “Rethinking Andy Warhol!” How many museums other than the larger, metropolitan museums can do this? But we were nimble, and here’s our chance.

I wanted to go into depth with pop, minimal and conceptual art. So much of art today is based on that “art of the idea.” I wanted to lay this foundation as a springboard for where we go from here.

**EM:** Where is the “art of the idea?” Is it in the political section, largely?

**LY:** Many students think “art of the idea” began with recent political events, but it really began with Conceptual Art, concept art. If you look back at some of the art in the Minimal and Conceptual movements, Sol Lewitt starts with an idea, a mathematical formula — a way of bridging color and line together — which may not have a lot of repercussions in the world outside us, but it’s a way to focus our vision, to settle us into a way of understanding. It can have a ripple effect. There’s Dorothea Rockburne, who’s 89 years old. She was very well-known in the ’70s. We only have one work in the collection, that folded white paper. I have a beautiful quote of hers where she talks about how a simple idea, the color of white, has so much in it.

**EM:** It’s strange that changing fashions push movements aside, while the artists are still producing their art and developing… I’m thinking about Olivia Bernard’s show up in Greenfield.

**LY:** I first heard of Olivia through her sculpture and was blown over when I first came to the community to make a studio visit. We have two beautiful works of hers in the collection, work on paper. It’s sculptural; it still fits into her sensibility. I feel it just sings on the wall. It’s another side of her vision that we’re able to bring to public attention.

**EM:** I’ll be giving that attention, too. I’ve always known her two-dimensional and her three-dimensional work go hand-in-hand, but now I’m looking again and wondering, “How?”

**LY:** Mary Ijichi is coming in from San Francisco to join Olivia in our “Artists on Artists” gallery talk on November 9. Mary’s piece, “String Drawing,” is that 12-foot-long scroll-like work on the wall that goes out onto the floor, pastel colors. It’s like Olivia’s, like skin. It was donated to the collection in the ’80s. It’s a very meditative piece in the way she creates it. We got funding to bring her here to meet with students, go to some
classrooms and do this public walkthrough. It will be another way to get her ideas out there.

**EM:** Accepting donations must be important for acquiring art within a public university’s budget. Does the collection’s focus on multiples also relate to budget?

**LY:** We do accept donations. An acquisitions committee works with me as gatekeepers. We’re open-arms to hear what people might want to donate, though we do have specific needs and specific constraints with storage. The early collection was essentially drawings. They could bring it out and have students look at it in a seminar room. To bring out a sculpture or a painting ... it would have been a storage issue, but also, how do you use it as a teaching tool? The multiples come from a larger edition. The Soto was from an edition of 500. So, we felt, okay, it’s a democratic process.

And why diverge from our focus in the ‘60s, when we have such treasures in that area? A Joel Shapiro drawing (half donated from the artist, half from our acquisition fund) is one fraction of the price of a sculpture. A drawing by an artist can be as potent as a painting or a sculpture, if that’s an area they’re working in.

At UMCA, numerous educational events and tours in conjunction with “60 Years of Collecting” will take place throughout the school year and are posted on the museum’s website, umass.edu/umca, including Artists on Art, a walkthrough with Mary Ijichi and Olivia Bernard on November 9 at 5 p.m. Also posted is a full video recording of “The Future of Campollecting,” a day-long public symposium that inaugurated the exhibition on September 30. All UMCA events are free and open to the public.

Elizabeth Michelman

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**Center for Contemporary Printmaking**

The Center for Contemporary Printmaking (CCP) is a non-profit organization dedicated to the art of the print: intaglio, lithography, monotype, silkscreen, woodblock printing, paper works, book arts, and digital arts. The entire spectrum of printmaking arts is here to be explored through workshops, edition printing with master printers, exhibitions, community programs, and an Artist-in-Residence Program.

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**ANNUAL MEMBERS EXHIBITION**

December 11, 2022 - February 19, 2023

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