

# Re-arranged MAG showcases new acquisitions



Jeff Spevak, @jeffspevak1

7:29 p.m. EDT August 23, 2015



(Photo: Provided photo)

The new guy in town actually died 60 years ago. Charlie Parker, jazz saxophone icon, as interpreted by the equally intriguing, but shamefully forgotten, Beauford Delaney.

*Charlie Parker* is one of four new works acquired this summer by the Memorial Art Gallery. He's been hanging around since then, as his surroundings evolve into a new look for the museum's front-end galleries, celebrating a grand re-opening on Thursday, an expanded version of its usual MAGthursdays.

The museum is extending a special invitation to the University of Rochester's incoming freshmen for this event. The Music in the Pavilion series features 1950s jazz by Colin Gordon & Associate, with a couple of film loops on the wall of the Pavilion, and food, wine and beer. Thursday's admission also includes the 7 p.m. Rochester-Finger Lakes artist lecture.

The last month has been the kind of shifting around of artwork and partitions that looks like simple fussiness to mere mortals, but is the museum's way of communicating a work's significance to its patrons.

A long gallery hallway has been re-configured into a series of conversation pits, directing eyes to consider the relationship among the works in each group. It's most dramatically illustrated by three pieces placed together: Ad Reinhardt's 1952 *Abstract Painting: Red*; John Koch's 1963 *Interlude*, depicting the wife of a painter bringing a cup of tea to his nude model during a break in the session; and a chaotic collage dominated by reds and oranges done in 1959 by Hans Hofmann, *Ruby Gold*. What's the connection between these seemingly disparate works? As suggested by Reinhardt's simple, vertical block of red, it's the shape of the color red in all three. A block of crimson in the Hofmann and the red robe worn by the artist's wife in the Koch are a match.

It's The Red Group. New topical wings include Fantasy of the Absurd, Landscapes and the 1950s. A similar conversation is going on near the doors of the main gallery entrance, not far from The Squinty-Eye Group. Kehinde Wiley's *After Memling's Portrait of a Man with a Letter* at first glance appears to be a canonical European portrait, particularly with its vintage-looking wood frame, complete with cabinet doors. But on closer inspection we see that it is a portrait of a young black man from New York City's Crown Heights neighborhood. And Hans Memling? A 15th-century painter who lived in Belgium. The museum had no Memlings in the store room, so it's paired Wiley with a set of 16th-century European portraits to get the job done. Staring at them from the other side of the room is a self portrait by the poet e.e. cummings; he was a pal of a former MAG director.

And illustrative of the cross-pollination that's becoming increasingly common among our cultural institutions, the MAG has borrowed from Buffalo's Albright-Knox Art Gallery one of Mark Rothko's typical geometric modernist works, 1968's *Untitled*. That's especially for anyone who attends *Red*, the play about Rothko that starts Oct. 20 at Geva Theatre.

The four recent acquisitions are now on display in the reworked gallery spaces. *Portrait of Qusuqzah #6* is a pop-art portrait by the Brooklyn artist Mickalene Thomas with paints and rhinestones on a wood panel. *Convertible Series, Group 10* is typical of the complex painted glass and mirrored geometry of Iranian artist Monir Farmanfarmaian. Hung Liu, born in China, now living in the United States, specializes in re-interpreting historical photos. Her *Three Fujins* depicts three women in traditional Chinese dress, each with an empty bird cage mounted in front of her. They are women momentarily freed of their cages.

*Charlie Parker* is a vivid portrait of the musician in many folk-art hues of yellow. Delaney, who was born in Tennessee in 1901, moved to New York City during the Harlem Renaissance, where he hung with a crowd that included bohemian pals writer Henry Miller, artist Georgia O'Keeffe and a man who was to become one of his best friends, writer James Baldwin. It was Baldwin who brought the actor Billy Dee Williams to Delaney's studio, where Williams bought *Charlie Parker*, owning it for many years. Baldwin also raised Delaney's levels of moral and social consciousness. The artist's subjects were often the struggling poor of the city, huddling around burning barrels of trash. A move to France coincided with increasingly abstract imagery. But Delaney also grappled with mental illness for much of his life. A black man in a racist society, and whose Christian upbringing conflicted with his homosexuality, heavy drinking added to Delaney's slide into mental illness. He told friends that violent people were stalking him at night. Committed to a hospital for the insane, Delaney died in 1979.

Charlie Parker and Beauford Delaney. Two interesting newcomers to Rochester.

JSPEVAK@DemocratandChronicle.com

## If you go

**What:** MAGthursdays, this week celebrating the museum's recent acquisitions and re-configured galleries, with live music, food and adult beverages.

**When:** 5 p.m. Thursday.

**Where:** Memorial Art Gallery, 500 University Ave.