

# Art and Architecture Get a Refresh on the California Coast

The Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego has undergone multiple renovations in its 80-plus years. This spring it has opened after yet another.



By Ted Loos

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5 MIN READ

This article is part of our latest special section on Museums, which focuses on new artists, new audiences and new ways of thinking about exhibitions.

SAN DIEGO — The Pacific Ocean surf steadily lapping at the coast not far from the newly renovated and expanded Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego serves as a metaphor for the successive waves of architecture that have formed the institution since it was founded.

High on a bluff here in the affluent village of La Jolla, it was established in 1941 in the Irving Gill-designed home of the philanthropist Ellen Browning Scripps. The museum — which has had several different names over the years — was expanded three times over the decades by the firm then known as Mosher & Drew, and in 1996 received a major makeover from the former Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates.

Now, the New York firm Selldorf Architects has had its turn, coming up with an addition and overhaul that may be the most transformative yet — and one that has incorporated the previous iterations.

Opened April 9, the \$105 million project doubles the overall square footage of the museum, and quadruples the gallery space, transforming the institution and what it can do. The museum was closed for three years during construction, although its satellite branch in downtown San Diego, established in 2007, remained open.



The reopening of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego features a special exhibition, “Niki de Saint Phalle in the 1960s,” featuring 94 pieces. The French artist, who gained fame for colorful and daring works, lived the last phase of her life in La Jolla. John Francis Peters for The New York Times

A space crunch had been hampering the museum for years, and was forcing the staff to make tough choices.

“We couldn’t have a special exhibition on view at the same time as our permanent collection,” said the museum’s director, Kathryn Kanjo, standing in front of the nearly-completed museum on a sunny March day. She added that the problem was exacerbated because “our collections have more than doubled in the last 40 years.”

The museum is showing off its new amplitude with a special exhibition, “Niki de Saint Phalle in the 1960s,” featuring 94 works, as well as several galleries displaying permanent collection pieces.

Ms. de Saint Phalle (1930–2002) was a French artist who gained fame for colorful and daring works, as when she had a sharpshooter fire a rifle at sculptures she had embedded with paint-filled balloons. She lived the last phase of her life in La Jolla.

The expansion project here has had a long timeline. Selldorf Architects won a competition to design it in 2014.

“It seems like we’ve been waiting for this for years — and we literally have been,” said the philanthropist Irwin Jacobs, a co-founder of Qualcomm. Along with his wife, Joan, he donated \$20 million for the project; the new building is named after the couple. (They threw in a couple of sculptures, too, including a pumpkin by Yayoi Kusama.)

In addition to the need for space, Ms. Kanjo said that the museum’s brief was, “Please try to respect our architectural legacy, but also bring some kind of clarity to it.”

For the architectural firm’s founder, Annabelle Selldorf, the project was appealing because it was squarely in her wheelhouse in one way, but also allowed her to push her own limits.



In her redesign of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, Annabelle Selldorf, founder of Selldorf Architects, said, “I thought about how I can bring people in, and make them feel like they are welcome there.” John Francis Peters for The New York Times

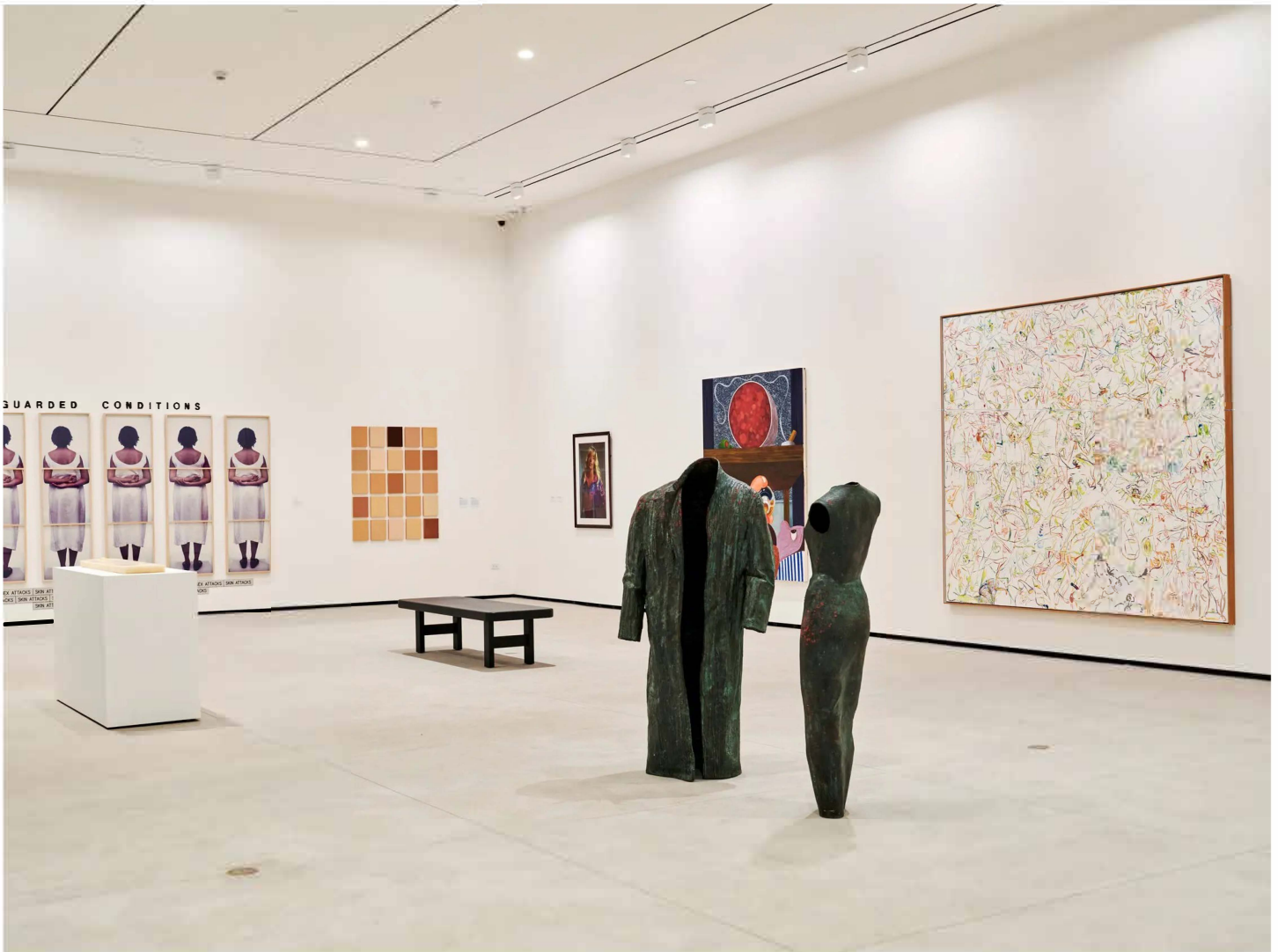
“People always think we do sensitive historical renovations, but that’s not all we do,” Ms. Selldorf said.

Her many high-profile cultural projects include the 2001 transformation of an Upper East Side mansion into the Neue Galerie New York, David Zwirner’s 20th Street gallery in Chelsea and the forthcoming renovation of the Frick Collection.



“It matters a great deal because it’s new,” Ms. Selldorf said of the San Diego museum. “It’s my biggest new-built institution. And it stands on its own two feet.”

The primary addition is on the southern end of the museum, on a lot that was purchased to provide room for expansion. Ms. Selldorf used textured concrete and travertine, among other materials, to create what she called “a space that is well-balanced, well-proportioned, calm, focused and not about gesture” — meaning that it doesn’t have a striking shape that calls attention to itself.



Inside the Copley Gallery of the San Diego contemporary art museum, part of the Selldorf expansion: a sculpture by Judith Shea, paintings by Sue Williams and Nicole Eisenman and photographs by Cindy Sherman. John Francis Peters for The New York Times

In that, she was in alignment with both current and former museum leadership.

“We were opposed to having a starchitect pounding their own chest,” said Hugh Davies, the museum’s previous director, who was involved in the initial phases of the project. “But we really did need more space — it wasn’t a gratuitous expansion.”



Kathryn Kanjo, the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, said an expansion was warranted. “Our collections have more than doubled in the last 40 years,” she said, and the museum could not have a special exhibition on view with its permanent collection. John Francis Peters for The New York Times

Some of the new galleries replace a former auditorium space, giving them dramatic, 20-foot ceilings, and the exhibition spaces are varied in shape throughout.

Mr. Jacobs noted that the circulation through the museum is now easier, too. “She gave us a coherent way for people to tour,” he said of Ms. Selldorf’s plan.

The architect also kept in mind the most obvious thing about the museum: its siting, a relatively rare seaside spot for an art institution. “It’s a spectacular location, and the views are phenomenal,” Ms. Selldorf said.

To connect the museum to nature, she turned a small parking lot on the north end of the campus into a sculpture garden, and she added terraces around the building. Skylights and vertical windows bring the site’s distinct natural light and coastal views into the new galleries.

Knitting together multiple iterations of the museum had its challenges, and one change made by Ms. Selldorf ruffled a few feathers: She removed a line of thick columns that stood in front of the Gill building and were part of the Venturi Scott Brown design.

A petition signed by architects and preservationists asked that it be kept as-is, and said that changes would be a “tremendous mistake.”



The artist John McCracken’s “Blue Block in Three Parts” (1966) was installed in the Fox Gallery of the Selldorf Expansion. John Francis Peters for The New York Times

Ms. Selldorf — who didn’t substantially alter most of the Venturi Scott Brown design, including the striking Axline Court, formerly the entrance area — said that her intention in removing the columns was to achieve “greater clarity across the history of all the building types.”

She noted that the columns were an intervention of sorts themselves, given that they were placed in front of Gill’s much earlier structure, built in 1916. (For anyone who’s curious about them, the columns are now preserved next door to the museum, in the garden of the La Jolla Historical Society.)



“You can today see the Irving Gill building completely unencumbered,” she added.

Denise Scott Brown, who was a principal of Venturi Scott Brown, was among the people who objected, and Ms. Selldorf made a point of meeting with her in person.

“Ultimately, I was able to speak with Denise, and I’m so glad about that,” Ms. Selldorf said. “My only regret is that I didn’t speak with her right at the beginning of the project.”

Now that substantially more art will be on view, museum visitors will be able to see the contours of the museum’s collection more clearly.

“Our strength really is in art from this region, the West Coast,” Ms. Kanjo said, particularly the California Light and Space movement of the 1960s and ’70s, featuring artists like Larry Bell and Helen Pashgian, both of whom have works currently on view.

The regional focus extends to the south, too.



The redesigned San Diego contemporary art museum embraces both its stunning coastal location and its regional culture, with works like Robert Irwin’s “Spanish Fan” (1995) installed in the ocean-facing sculpture garden. John Francis Peters for The New York Times

“We’re committed to the border, so we have strength in Latinx work,” Ms. Kanjo said, adding, “We’re closer to Tijuana than to Los Angeles.”

The opening roster includes collections by the artist known simply as Marisol (born María Sol Escobar); Celia Álvarez Muñoz; and Alejandro Diaz. Also on view is a broad array of well-known artists, including Robert Irwin, Jack Whitten and Helen Frankenthaler.

Ms. Selldorf said that her goal with the whole design, and particularly with the transparent entrance pavilion, which is largely made of glass, was to make people want to get inside to see the art.

“I thought about how I can bring people in, and make them feel like they are welcome there,” she said. “I know that sounds a little bit trite, but I think it’s really important.”