Something in the Way: Season of Love (Patricia Cronin, Yayoi Kusama, and Robert Indiana) at Tampa Museum of Art

15 HOURS AGO by JEAN MARIE CAREY


Curtis Hixon Waterfront Park is Tampa's eight-acre swing in the direction of New York City's High Line, a programmed public space that is similarly bounded by a surfeit of unaffordable housing, "craft cocktail" joints, a smattering of local Vietnamese and Italian cafés, one excellent rare
bookshop, and musical chairs skirmishes between vigilant real estate prospectors, the police, and the homeless. A free, popular “yoga in the park” class on Sunday evenings attracts dedicated practitioners irritated by interloping dog walkers and families with children who glare at one another as the contested meaning of “park” hangs between them. Contained on the west by the Hillsborough River as it empties into Tampa Bay, the salty breeze offers a whiff of possibility.

The northern border of the park is the Tampa Museum of Art. The Stanley Saitowitz-designed building, opened in 2010, avoids much of the “extra” of, for example, Munich’s opaque Museum Brandhorst or the twisty Tate Modern, also launched in the early ‘aughts. Instead, Saitowitz offered up a variation on the theme of “gallery as white box” (and indeed the nimble internal fluctuations of the museum’s representations of its permanent collection of American modern paintings and Greek, Roman, and Etruscan antiquities meshes with the customs of European Kunsthalle). The museum's crown, and great, free, ever-visible gift to the public, is Leo Villareal's LED 2010-light installation *Sky (Tampa)* on the museum's south façade. Villareal (b. 1967) embedded a matrix of diodes that, at night, flash, ripple, scatter, and cascade between two thin layers of brushed aluminum, 45 feet tall and 300 feet long.


Sometimes these urban characteristics effloresce into something close to the sublime – or at least...
what my admittedly warped sense of aesthetics considers immanent, anyway. During the winter holidays, this downtown agora adds an ice skating feature to its offerings. One Sunday in December 2017, as the sun set over the river and just as the yoga class had settled into a silent shavasana, from the skating rink 20 meters away erupted the unmistakable musical signature of Psy: “OPPAN GANGNAM STYLE!” Yogis erupted in laughter. At that exact moment, as if in response to the contradictory stimulations, Sky (Tampa) flickered into life, the skin of the night awakened to explore, interact, luminesce.

This substantive scene-setting is relevant for a point I want to make at the end of this review, which is actually about the Tampa Museum of Art’s ambitious and manifestly successful Season of Love, a three-part overlapping themed series of exhibitions that began earlier in 2018. Rolling openings showcased works by Patricia Cronin, Yayoi Kusama, and Robert Indiana.

Kusama (b. 1929) has undergone something of both a resurgence in visibility and a rebranding over the past year or so, with major retrospectives of her work at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and the High Museum in Atlanta. Kusama's seemingly intentionally ephemeral “mirrored infinity rooms” have also been added to permanent collections in Denmark and the United Kingdom. What is a bit concerning is seeing some of these works, which are clearly in line with her earliest “infinities” from the 1960s, presented as a part of the spatial aesthetics movement currently, and recently, in vogue. Gone from the names of these works are the words “Obsession” and “Obliteration,” which the artist frequently incorporated into her titles and writing as recently as 2015. Kusama's overt association with second-wave feminism, self-confinement to a psychiatric ward in Tokyo, collaborative relationships with Donald Judd and Joseph Cornell, and horrified reaction to the male body are scrubbed from promotional biographies. I am particularly sad to see the omission of Kusama's descriptions of synaesthetic visions of color and aural hallucinations diminished.

Experiencing one of Kusama's Obliteration Room installations in New Zealand in 2017, it was clear that the rod-and-cone fatiguing spots of red and green on blinding white walls and tumescent, wobbling, phallic fonts of molded rubber was meant to be disorienting and oppressive, an external manifestation of the artist's psychosexual “dots obsession,” which is her signatory motif. None of this is to say that Kusama does not have complete control of her “brand;” in 2012, began a design partnership with Louis Vuitton profligate goods, and, for at least the past decade, has been accepting commissions for sculptures and installations or selling existing works.
It is one of these, *LOVE IS CALLING*, that is on display at the TMA. The work belongs to Jeff and Penny Vinik, the owners of the Tampa Bay Lightning hockey team (their philanthropic Vinik Family Foundation is underwriting much of the Season of Love effort), who acquired it after seeing it at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in 2016, according to the TMA’s curator of modern and contemporary art Joanna Robotham.

“The fleeting beauty of love and life is a constant theme in Kusama’s art and the tentacle forms are reminiscent of her early soft sculptures…”, Robotham explained. The latter is certain and the “love” aspect is elevated in the sonic component of *LOVE IS CALLING*, which includes Kusama reciting a love poem. With it soothing pastel violet, aqua, and pink lights flowing against black, but easily discernible, protuberances, this certainly is a Kusama that will be accessible to many, and the installation has been very popular, drawing ticketed lines of people who may spend a limited number of minutes in this version of the infinity room. Perhaps for me my first awareness and experience of Kusama was defining; the diminution of intensity made the work feel like a very sophisticated bounce house.

Defanging the phallic components of Kusama’s work also blunts a connection to the companion exhibition by Robert Indiana (1929–2018). Certainly, sex is an important component of romantic love (and a major aspect of the Patricia Cronin work as well). Fortunately, both the skillful installation of *Robert Indiana: A Sculpture Retrospective* and the breadth of Indiana’s assembled
Something in the Way: Season of Love (Patricia Cronin, Yayoi Kusama...ber Indiana) at Tampa Museum of Art - Arte Fuse Contemporary Art

Installation of Robert Indiana: A Sculpture Retrospective and the breadth of Indiana’s assembled work (organized by Buffalo’s Albright-Knox Art Gallery) does not shy away from the artist’s carnal and sacred affirmations of the male anatomy.


Seth Pevnick, the TMA’s Chief Curator and Richard E. Perry Curator of Greek and Roman Art, an archaeologist as well as an art historian, pointed out in a tour of the gallery that one of Indiana’s favorite sculptural references was the herm, an apotrope originating in ancient Greece. The typical herm is a simplified male figure with a head affixed to a rectangular base, normally smooth save for prominent genitalia. Once pointed out, this aspect of many of Indiana’s sculptures is impossible to not see. So many herms!

Though some of Indiana's work is slyly humorous in this way, there is much more to these sculptures, which incorporate not only mythological but literary references and the faith in chaos of the scavenger, and in their twinned forms (twins being, after all, an aspect of the god Hermes), interrogate the nature of doubles, copies, and originals – one of my favorite subjects. Ahab (1962), for example, is one such object that is two. The first, an assemblage of gesso, wood, and iron wheels was composed of odds and ends Indiana found near his Bowery studio. The second, identical at first, is a solid bronze replica of the original, cast in 1991. There are several of these intriguing pairings.
Indiana’s hard-edge pop art often incorporates text, of course. Of particular intrigue are the words Err, Eat, Hug, and Die. These appear in varying configurations, including on totems and in a light sculpture. The TMA exhibition is spacious and cozy at the same time, allowing for unhurried contemplation of Indiana's work, and underscoring how deserving the artist's entire oeuvre is of further study. Indiana, who withdrew from public life and lived a hermetic existence in the last decades of his life, has not received the same exhaustive analysis as his contemporaries Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. It is time for this to happen.
The TMA very wisely placed Indiana's most famous work, a polychrome version of the *LOVE* sculpture from 1970 which began its life as a red, blue, and green print in 1964, away from the main exhibition in the museum's lobby, allowing people to pose for selfies in front of it without distracting from the main body of work.
Robert Indiana, LOVE, original cast 1970; polychrome replica. Installation at Tampa Museum of Art. Photo: Jean Marie Carey.

Patricia Cronin consecrated the Season of Love trilogy with a work commissioned by the TMA, *Aphrodite Reimagined, 2018*, a marble and resin sculpture installed on the museum’s west-facing outdoor balcony. The sculpture is an elaboration upon a First Century torso of the Greek goddess of love in the museum’s antiquities collection, outfitted for the 21st with semi-translucent limbs and head, not so much a reimagining as a completion of how the Roman copy probably would have appeared (to me “reimagining” would have meant outfitting Aphrodite with something peculiar like multiple Kali arms or, referencing the 2018 embedded in the title, at least an iPhone and a hoodie).
Cronin’s painting series of ghostly Aphrodites rendered in silhouette against sheets of dark acetate with overlays of acrylic paint are more intriguing, very well done, and beautifully installed. They also complement the Kusama and Indiana exhibitions with themes of both repetition and reproduction. The small, two-part green glass *Aphrodite (Metropolitan Museum)* 2018 is simply a beautiful object, though it does not accomplish, as its information card states, its objective of “challenging the viewer to think about presence and absence, as well as the missing history of women.”

Though I believe conceptual art does require an explanation to be fully appreciated, the explanation has to make sense, and this perhaps is the underlying problem with the “Conversations with the Collection” inaugural outing. For surely Aphrodite’s history is anything but lost – from Praxiteles to Botticelli to Bouguereau – her image and even the narrative of her “back story” is exceedingly well known. However well-intentioned, in 2018 – the date that is consistently invoked and the one in which for the first time in human history men outnumber women – a classical
goddess cannot stand in for the real women around the globe who are missing owing to violence, poverty, war, maternal mortality, and infanticide. One of Cronin’s best-known works appears at the TMA as well, though it is not directly related to the Aphrodite project. Memorial to a Marriage, from 2002, is an oversize grave marker the artist made before gay marriage was legal in the U.S. A bronze version resides permanently in the famous Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx (which, again, and maybe this is just me, seems odd, because cemetery = dead). My students this fall were captivated by this larger-than-life-size sculpture, with many writing not only thorough and moving visual analyses of the work itself but investigating the implementation of the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996 and its striking down in 2013, and the biographies of Cronin and her wife, Deborah Kass, who are the models for the sculpture. Taken in this way, Memorial to a Marriage wonderfully fulfills the museum’s mission as a public institution whose goal it is to connect with patrons, maybe particularly students who are new to the social function of art.
Aesthetically and as part of an elevation of women, though, I am not so sure about *Memorial to a Marriage*. Part of this is the enormity, and the rather rough finishing, of the slab of Carrara marble off-centered in the gallery devoted to Cronin's paintings. In a Friedian sense, the work obstinately refused to leave me alone, and, literally, with even just a few other people in the hall, I could not walk around it to look at the other works. Depictions of conventionally attractive lesbians in bed
are generally aimed at men, and rather than a funerary monument to eternal love, *Memorial to Marriage* reminds me much more of Jeff Koons’ series of sculptures from the early 1990s of himself and Ilona “Cicciolina” Staller.

So having begun with “corpse pose” I would like for symmetry’s sake to leave it there, but I must further close the loop on the opening scene. As noted, the Season of Love project has been substantively underwritten by the Vinik Family Foundation. I complained about the trend of incessant intrusive sponsorship branding last year in the case of Lavazza espresso around the *Visionaries: Creating a Modern Guggenheim* (https://www.museumbookstore.com/blogs/book-review/book-review-visionaries-creating-a-modern-guggenheim) exhibit and catalogue. Of course, museums must often accept outside funding to mount ambitious projects. But someone must also be bold enough to bell the cat when the situation gets out of control, especially in the case of some of Tampa Bay's new money largesse. (The Gobioff Foundation is another repeat offender with a similarly ornate logo with Trapper-Keeper-esque typography.)

My point is this (see below): Leo Villareal’s *Sky (Tampa)* and Saitowitz’s building itself are discrete works of art, some of Tampa’s very few distinctive public works that are easily appreciated *in public*. They need to *not* be festooned with advertisements, no matter who is paying for them. Overindulgence of stakeholders and investors has led to catastrophes such as the Walker Art Center’s capitulation in 2017 to the point of destroying *its own commissioned works*, and, just this past week, the Volkswagen Stiftung’s forcing of the dismissal of Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg’s director Ralf Beil over his stance on curatorial independence. Season of Love, taken altogether, is a cutting edge and very worthy program, bringing together three modern and contemporary art luminaries who could easily hold down their own solo shows. It is admittedly a very difficult task to ask of the TMA, to keep up both this level of exhibitions, and its hands on the wheels that turn them.
The **Tampa Museum of Art** ([http://tampamuseum.org/](http://tampamuseum.org/))’s **Season of Love** project encompasses three overlapping installations. **Patricia Cronin, Aphrodite, and the Lure of Antiquity: Conversations with the Collection** runs through 6 January 2019; Yayoi Kusama’s **Love is Calling** closes on 14 February 2019; and **Robert Indiana: A Sculpture Retrospective** is open until 17 March 2019.

Writing by Jean Marie Carey. Photos by Jean Marie Carey and courtesy of the Tampa Museum of Art and [St. Cate Fine Arts (http://stcate.com/)](http://stcate.com/) as noted in cutlines.
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