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ARTS AND THEATER

Artist Sibony hopes Pulitzer exhibition inspires moments of insight



Artist Gedi Sibony walks through his upcoming exhibit, "In the Still Epiphany," on Tuesday, April 3, 2012, at the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts in St. Louis.

Among the virtues of the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts is its sheer spaciousness. It's a place that inspires thoughtful wandering, with the perfect atmosphere for taking in paintings, sculpture or most any type of art.

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That dynamic surely wasn't lost on art-world star Gedi Sibony, whom the Pulitzer brought in to curate an exhibition in celebration of its 10th anniversary. As expansive as it is eclectic, "In the Still Epiphany" is made up of almost 50 pieces from the collection of Emily and Joseph Pulitzer Jr. Among the artists represented are Paul Klee, Roy Lichtenstein, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and John Singer Sargent.

Selecting the works to be included in the exhibition — paintings, sculptures and works on paper, as well as ritual and decorative objects — was a meticulous process, Sibony said.

"First the books were given to me — the books of the collection, which I tremendously enjoyed flipping through, and certain paintings immediately drew my attention," he said.

Sibony then made his way through the actual artworks, starting with Picasso's "The Fireplace."

Seeing them up close "was like grabbing these sacks of questions that I knew I wanted to answer later," he said. "That was the selection process. The problem was how to fit it all together in a way that would most honor the interest that I had in the works."

Emily Rauh Pulitzer, founder of the foundation and chairwoman of the board of trustees, said she had been impressed with Sibony's work and wanted to bring his sensibility to the exhibition.

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"Gedi not only was very interested and knowledgeable, and committed to looking at art of different periods, but has this amazing ability to use space and light and texture and form in very creative ways," she said.

"In the Still Epiphany" has a wide emotional palette, from the impressionistic joie de vivre of Matisse's "The Conservatory" (1938) to the pop-art inscrutability of Lichtenstein's "Curtains" (1962). Newspaper legend and onetime Post-Dispatch publisher Joseph Pulitzer is the subject of both a 1905 painting by John Singer Sargent and a 1907 bust by Auguste Rodin.

The exhibition's layout is designed to create conversations between the pieces, with viewers presumably encouraged to eavesdrop. Its title, "In the Still Epiphany," is inspired in part by the expression on the Virgin Mary's face in early Renaissance Annunciation paintings.

"And then there is the phenomenon of moments we all have of great insight," Sibony said. "All the brain clutter drops away and time expands. That is the stillness." Although the works span a vast time period, "the issues seem consistent."

"In the Still Epiphany" is something of a departure for Sibony, who is best known for works that make evocative use of space, light and everyday objects. In his role as curator of the exhibition, the challenge was to imaginatively coordinate the space designed by architect Tadao Ando with artworks that command attention quite nicely on their own.