

Justice and wonder at heart of Louis-Dreyfus Foundation

BY ABBY LUBY

Experiencing the extraordinary and highly diverse art collection at the William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation is a visual feast. The Mount Kisco-based art collection has 4,000 works of art, each one eliciting delight.

Borrowed art from the collection is now on view at the Katonah Museum of Art in the “Sublime Geometries” exhibition. The foundation loaned work to the museum in 2016 for the show “Inside the Outside: Five Self-Taught Artists from the William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation.”

The passion for art by the collection’s founder and billionaire businessman William Louis-Dreyfus (1932–2016) is undeniable. A true renaissance man, Louis-Dreyfus was chief executive officer of the Louis Dreyfus Group, a lawyer, philanthropist and published poet. He is also the father of “Seinfeld” and “Veep” actor Julia Louis-Dreyfus.

For over half a century Louis-Dreyfus purchased paintings, drawings, photography and sculpture from artists all over the world. He chose art with pure, unprejudiced, visceral perception — if he liked a painting it didn’t matter if it was by an established artist or one unknown. Louis-Dreyfus’ zeal for the collection’s 225 emerging artists clearly separated him from the high-end blue-chip art collectors.

The collection, said to be worth between \$10 and \$50 million, is housed in a 16,000-square-foot former electronics warehouse. In 2011 the building was painstakingly transformed into exquisite galleries and viewing spaces.

Lending work to the Katonah Museum of Art is part of the foundation’s longstanding loan program and collaboration with museums and galleries all over the world. Works from the collection have been featured at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Bruce Museum, New York Studio School, the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Serpentine Gallery in London, the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Luigi Rovati Foundation in Italy. Foundation art is found in university buildings and hotel lobbies.

Louis-Dreyfus’ lasting gift is guiding how people look at and experience art. Work is specifically placed to let viewers make connections via similar visual content or complementary materials, the eye easily traverses from one artist to the next. The work of James Castle (1899–1977), a deaf, self-taught artist who couldn’t read includes found objects and work on paper using homemade ink from wood stove soot. Castle’s delicate hand recreates a certain melancholy in his farm landscapes and sheds. Matching the mood on an adjacent wall are the contemplative, large charcoal works on paper by Parisian artist Jean-Baptiste Sécheret (1957–). Although culturally generations apart, one can easily connect the two artists.

“It all comes from William,” said Mary Anne Costello, foundation curator. “You go from one piece to the next without any disruption. The spirit of the art connects.”

The lyrical, abstract sculptures of John Newman (1952–), openly exhibited on a large mahogany table, are a curious play between buoyant curves and densely anchored bases. Drawing the eye from Newman’s whimsical sculptures directly behind are the immersive, figurative watercolors by Matthew Daub depicting everyday streetscapes and railway tracks with a unique stillness — a moment you can fall into. Both abstract sculpture and recognizable scenes embrace depth and sense of space.

Known artists in the collection include Jean Dubuffet, Joan Miró, Alberto Giacometti, Wassily Kandinsky, David Hockney, Alice Neel, Claes Oldenburg, Joan Snyder, Yves Tanguy Ilya Bolotowsky. But the considerable number of works by self-taught artists define the collection as contrarian.

As an avid fan of authentic, outsider artists who were in most cases poor with no formal art training, their work speaks to Louis-Dreyfus’ commitment to those underserved and disenfranchised.

Several works are by Bill Traylor (1853–1949) and Thornton Dial (1928–2016) both born in Alabama. Traylor, born into slavery and illiterate all of his life, started painting at age 84. Primal-like, silhouetted images of people and animals appear mid-step or dancing to the frame’s edge. Many reflect the Southern black history of enslavement and subservience as seen in pieces of men with rifles, others show dogs chasing young girls.

The very fluid and energized drawings and paintings of Dial are a parade of sweeping rhythmic gestures and twirling faces lopsided as they swim past the frame. Bodies are scribbled and disjointed, animals grimace. One can hear Dial chuckling while painting.

Recognizing outside artists was an extension of Louis-Dreyfus’ sense of justice and his deep appreciation for diversity. In the film “Generosity of Eye: Art Transformed into Education” narrated by Julia Louis-Dreyfus (seen at the current Katonah Museum of Art show) we learn that Louis-Dreyfus entered law school in 1954, the same year of the U.S. supreme court’s landmark decision for Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, declaring state-sponsored segregation in public schools unconstitutional.

“William believed without regard to anything, everyone has an equal chance,” noted Costello. “He was open to everything. This art collection is DEI all over the place and shows the connection between justice and art.”

Louis-Dreyfus was never shy about where he stood politically, according to Costello.

“He was on Nixon’s enemy’s list and he was pleased as punch,” she said. “In 2012 he took out a half page ad in the New York Times pledging \$1 million to fight voter suppression and encouraged his fellow millionaires to money up.”

The strong belief that universal education is essential to overcoming discrimination and inequality is key to the foundation’s mission. All proceeds from foundation art sales go to the nonprofit Harlem Children’s Zone which has a widely diverse educational program for underprivileged children.

“William said he never wanted to part with any of the art,” Costello recalled. “But if it’s benefitting the Harlem’s Children Zone, he couldn’t get it out of here fast enough.”

The foundation no longer acquires new work and the ultimate goal is to eventually sell off the entire collection.

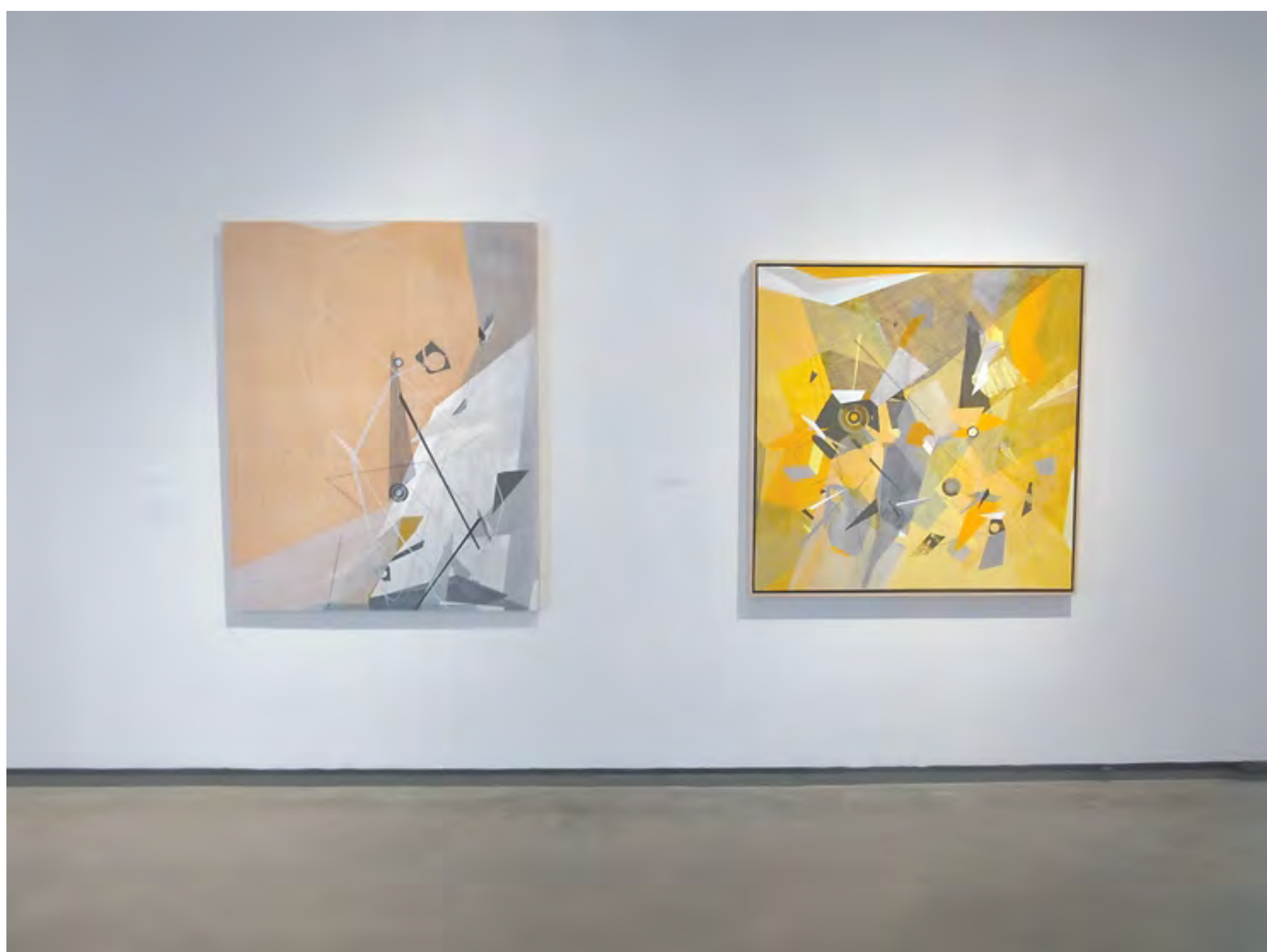
A story Louis-Dreyfus tells in the film “Generosity of Eye” is how, as a young boy, he was walking down a Paris street with his rich grandmother and he saw a beggar wearing dark glasses holding a tin cup. “I saw him and I went over to put change in his cup,” he remembers. “My grandmother said ‘You must never do that because you can’t be sure that he’s blind.’ It was one of the most remarkable attitudes of the rich I ever heard.”

A favored painting by Stanley Lewis “William and His Beech Tree” shows a relaxed Louis-Dreyfus lounging under a favorite tree outside his home on Croton Lake Road. His love for trees was well known and expressed in his poem “Adjusting” from his poetry book “Letters Written and Not Sent” (2019 Red Hen Press): “I have a passion for the look of trees, their fixedness, their ecstasy in rising out of the ground, arms up in praise of heaven and below...”

The Louis-Dreyfus collection can be viewed online at wldfoundation.org. Tours are free by appointment only. The foundation welcomes all visitors, including groups from schools, senior communities, museums and art organizations.

The William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation is located at 211 Kisco Ave., Mount Kisco.

Sublime Geometries: Selections from The William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation



Two paintings by Dannielle Tegeder in the “Sublime Geometries,” a new exhibit at the Katonah Museum of Art. ABBY LUBY PHOTOS

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“Sublime Geometries,” the new exhibit at the Katonah Museum of Art is a display of abstract art weaving lines, angles and shapes into an intriguing geometric poetry.

On loan from the collection of the William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation are works by five, living intergenerational women artists: Alison Hall, Hester Simpson, Dannielle Tegeder, Claudia Wieser and Alison Wilding.

KMA Associate Curator Elizabeth Monti recalled first working with the Louis-Dreyfus collection in 2016 for an outsider art show which was very popular. Monti said she had specific ideas for the current show.

“This time I wanted to do a deep dive and focus on specific kinds of work. The foundation had an embarrassment of riches and wonderful objects.”

Monti connected with Louis-Dreyfus foundation curator Mary Anne Costello in April to share ideas about the exhibition.

“Elizabeth did a fabulous job making her selection, she knew what she wanted to do and we worked together. It’s a wonderful show,” Costello noted. “There is a close connection between the foundation and KMA and loaning artwork is a way for us to support each other and our perspective missions which is to bring important art work to the KMA and the broader community.”

The placement of paintings and sculpture in KMA’s Richter gallery allow for quiet contemplation and immersion into shifting layers and patterns seen in much of the work. Greeting us upon entering is Wilding’s “Dismantle,” a 10-foot triangular tower made of fiberglass and resin precariously balanced on a dark, cone shape made of leaded steel. It creates a bravado tone for the exhibit.

“There is something interesting to explore with different artists working in abstract forms,” Monti explained. “The grid has a history in modern art as a point of fascination.”

“Secret Midnight Sun Universe Plan with Chemical Silver: Suspended Classification of Color and Shape Language,” a painting by Dannielle Tegeder, is a smorgasbord of lines and shapes clashing across the canvas in a frenzied dance. A random of fluttering angles feels magnetic and energized as objects float in space.

The glinty stainless-steel grid in Alison Wilding’s sculpture “Model for Echo” reveals a shiny brass ball paradoxically embedded in the metallic network.

“The Wilding sculptures use a great grid with metal elements but the work is round and slightly organic,” Monti explained about Wilding’s work. “There is a little tension between geometrics and organic sneaking in.”

The small-scale paintings of Hester Simpson appear simple but the longer the gaze the more they grow on you. Thick straight vertical slabs of teal, violet, burnt orange and charcoal grey in “An Absence of One” seem to pulsate in slow motion.

The KMA viewing room shows the documentary film “Generosity of Eye,” where Louis-Dreyfus (1932–2016) walks through the foundation’s galleries interviewed by his daughter, actor Julia Louis-Dreyfus.



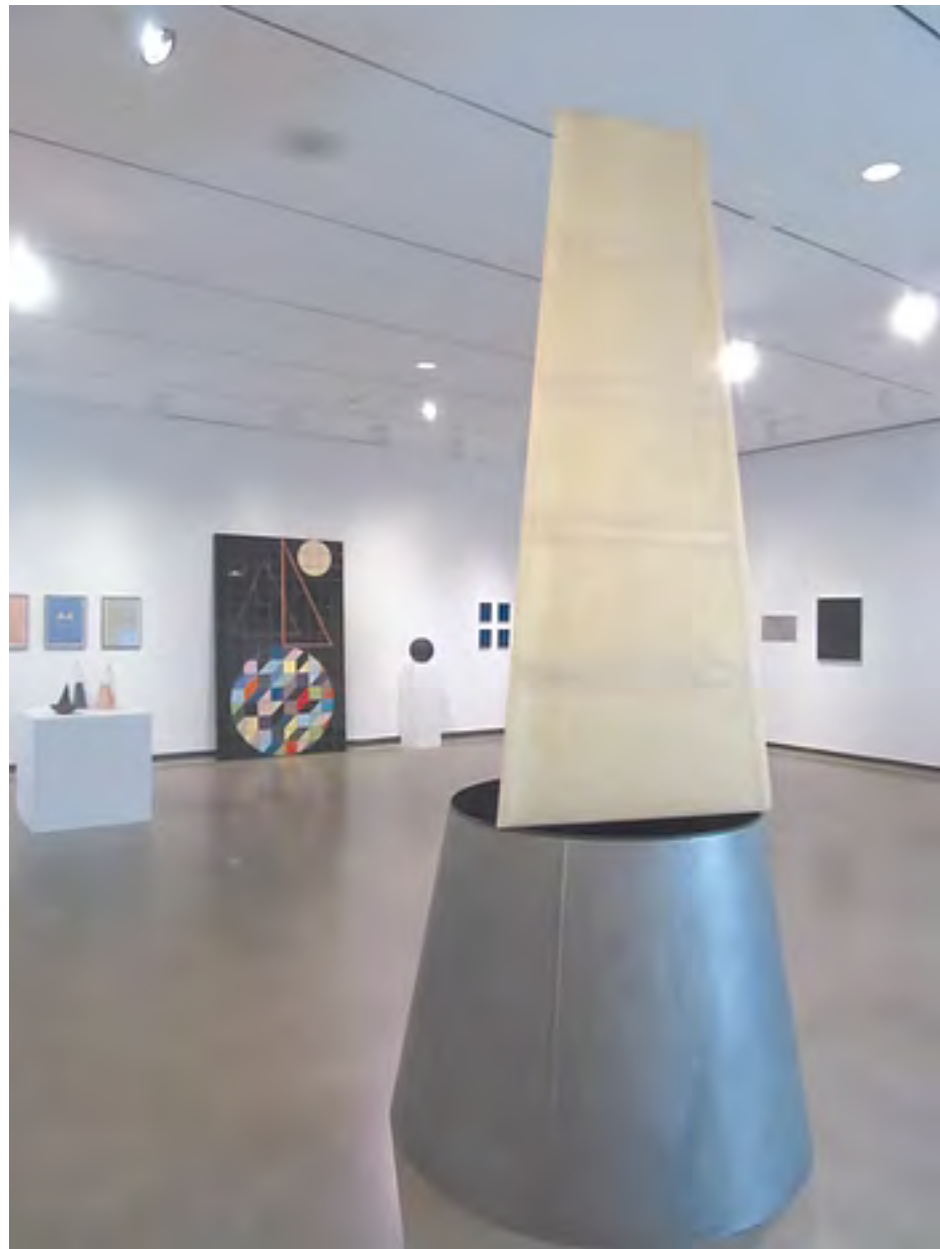
William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation curators Christina Kee and Mary Anne Costello at one of the foundation galleries. Directly behind them are works by Tai Shan Schierenberg and to the right is art by Elena Kolbasina. ABBY LUBY PHOTOS



Curator Christina Kee leading a tour showing how each artist elicits a story about Louis-Dreyfus’ relationship to the artist. Kee shows sculptures on the table by John Newman, the watercolors behind are by Matthew Daub.



Curator Mary Anne Costello pulls out work stored at the William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation collection.



Work at “Sublime Geometries,” the new exhibit at the Katonah Museum of Art include Alison Wilding’s large opaque sculpture “Dismantle,” and “Untitled” by Claudia Wieser, and small paintings by Alison Hall.