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René Paul Barilleaux Retires: Looking Back on Lifetimes & Legacies in ““untitled” at the McNay

NICHOLAS FRANK

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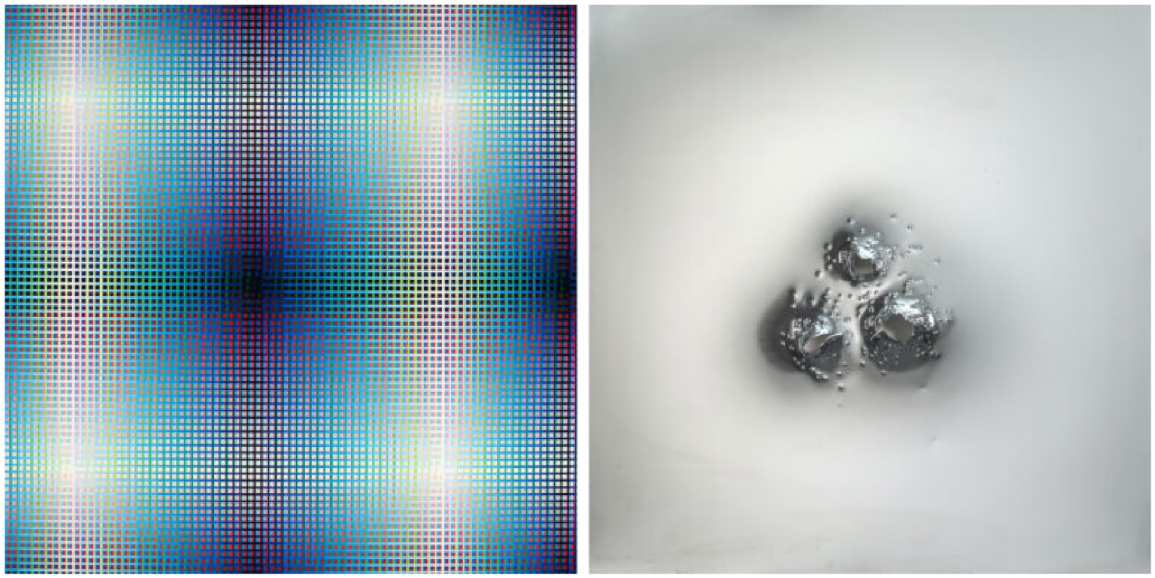
How to sum up a curatorial career? Exhibitions are ephemeral, even in the more epochal time frame of museums. Show catalogs live on, but as remnants, artifacts, reminders of the time and place when many times and places were brought together in a singular event. The zone where a longtime museum curator leaves a true lasting imprint is the permanent collection, as close to eternal as things get for us transient beings here on Earth.

When René Paul Barilleaux told his boss Matthew McLendon, Director and CEO of the McNay Art Museum, that he would be retiring from his role as Head of Curatorial Affairs, McLendon had an idea. Why not do an exhibition, the equivalent of an artist’s career retrospective, surveying what Barilleaux has helped the museum acquire over his 20 years at the institution?

René Paul Barilleaux

During an arranged walkthrough of *untitled: 20 Years of Collecting Contemporary Art*, Barilleaux displayed his customary cheerful enthusiasm, not only in talking about the show, but toward every single item in the show. He reminds us that though museums maintain institutional edifices as Parthenons of culture, the essence of art is personal interaction. How many artist studios Barilleaux has roamed over decades, only he can know, but he's quick with charming tales of visits that started awkwardly and turned into lifelong friendships.

Untitled begins appropriately with the first piece of art Barilleaux acquired for the McNay: *Blue (#267)*, a grid painting by Houston artist Susie Rosmarin. On the opposite face of the moveable wall at the show's entrance, hangs the last-ever artwork he acquired for the McNay: *Other Voices 3* (2006) by Margaret Evangeline, a New York artist who recently relocated to San Antonio. French American artist Niki de Saint-Phalle famously employed shotguns in her painting, but Evangeline turned the craft of sign-pelting into an art form with her stainless steel-with-gunshot wall sculpture, an inside-out homage to the bullet-riddled road signs visible along any Texas highway.



(Left) Susie Rosmarin, "Blue (#267)," 2002, acrylic on canvas. (Right) Margaret Evangeline, "Other Voices 3," 2006, stainless steel with gunshot

This wall alone contains multitudes. During a walkthrough of the show, Barilleaux said the entrance wall closed a personal loop of sorts: he graduated with Rosmarin from Pratt Institute in New York City in 1981, and he and Evangeline are originally from the same rural area of Louisiana. These are personal connections, far from assumptions we tend to make about the pillared edifices of the museum world, and they reveal something about how culture is shaped. Barilleaux's eye was formed as an artist, studying painting along with Rosmarin during a transitional moment in the New York art world. He revealed that as a painter he was torn between emergent conceptual strains, the wry graphics of pop art, and the lingering influence of abstract expressionism. This seeming confusion, however, well suits the role of a curator, who must set personal biases to one side and judge work for what it is. Shaping an eye and a collection are similar, in that while we can never count out our bias entirely, we seek a wider scope through which to discern what insists on attention beyond the current moment.

Sure, Barilleaux knew Rosmarin, but he said it was that he knew of her. He admired her work, and wanted to make his first acquisition that of a Texas artist. He and Evangeline share a geographical background, so it gives some sense of closure for her work to be the final acquisition of his career. But it's his evaluation of her work, its import and sublime purpose — part of a series addressing gun violence in America — that drove the acquisition.

So it's not exactly who you know, it's that you know. Little doors of perception open wider through personal connection, bringing facets of empathy into the equation. The challenge of the museum collection is: Can we get others to empathize with this work in the same ways?

The imprint of the museum's founder, Marion Koogler McNay, bears on Barilleaux's evolution. He felt charged to carry on her legacy, and develop his eye according to tenets she laid out with her tastes and predilections: "Marion McNay had a very interesting eye. She often collected atypical examples by well-known artists." He cited the Cézanne painting, *Houses on the Hill* (https://collection.mcnayart.org/objects/23/houses-on-the-hill) (1900-1906), that some viewers assume is unfinished, and that "she went on a limb and bought a Picasso collage when that was new. We've used the idea that it doesn't necessarily need to be the signature work by an artist, but it might be some unusual work that distinguishes this collection from another collection."

It's hard for us to believe now that acquiring a Picasso was once considered a risk, but that's often the role of a museum curator, to acquire things before others understand their import. A museum like the McNay is also distinguished from other museums because it embraces its founder's intuitions. The McNay collection has personality.

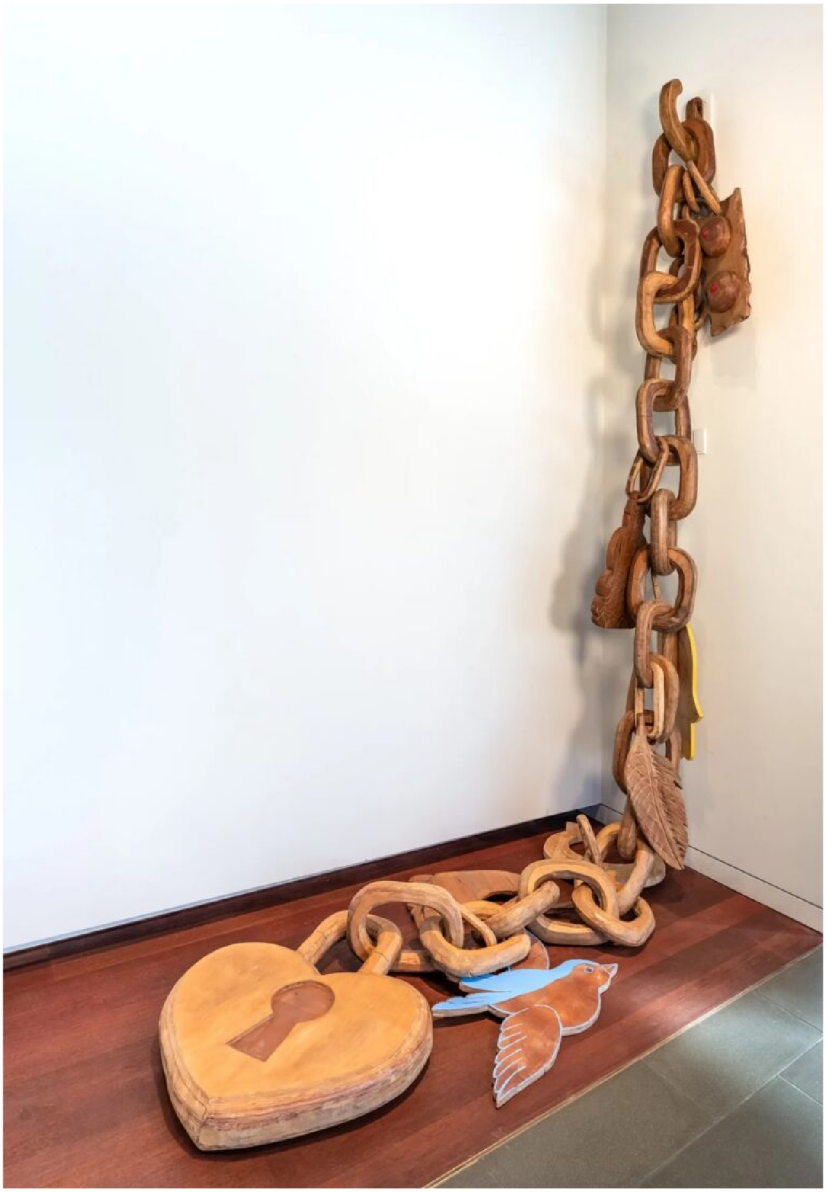
An installation view of "untitled: 20 Years of Collecting Contemporary Art" at the McNay Art Museum

Barilleaux has also been forward-thinking with acquisitions, in how they might be displayed in future settings and in how artworks align with others in the collection. *Untitled* features a large wall installation by Fort Worth artist Letitia Huckaby, *Koinonia* (2021), though it's a partial rendering of the full paintings-and-wallpaper installation that graced the McNay's grand entrance wall in 2021. Upon acquiring the work, made specifically for the entrance, Barilleaux arranged with the artist that it could be displayed flexibly in the future. The Vincent Valdez painting *The Strangest Fruit 9* (2013), on permanent display in the McNay's sculpture gallery, now has a companion piece in Amalia Mesa-Bains' *Strange Fruit* (2025), acquired after Barilleaux saw the print in her 2024 exhibition at the San Antonio Museum of Art and knew how perfectly it would complement the Valdez piece.

A curator must also innovate, which sometimes means simply recognizing an underappreciated aspect of an artist's oeuvre. *Paris Speaking Dress* by New York artist Lesley Dill represents Barilleaux's 2015 solo exhibition of her work, the first to focus on her performance-based sculptures.

In this way, the curator serves an educational role, enlightening audiences to the many facets of artists and artmaking. Through context we gain deeper appreciation of an artist's motives beyond simple aesthetic appreciation, learning something about why they make what they make. I recently lamented the rise of massive group shows, and at 124 artworks in four spaces (including outdoor sculptures), *untitled* fits the description. But there's always the possibility of a new discovery, and I was delighted to encounter a subtle piece by Steve Keister, an artist Barilleaux encountered during his time at Pratt. *USO #10* (c. 1978), a suspended small sculpture of painted wood with alligator skin, holds an interior glow from the light orange paint applied to its inside surfaces. It might not be a profound piece, but it has similar charms as other small work artists such as Richard Tuttle or Vincent Fecteau, and this is not an artist I would have known about otherwise.

The whole *untitled* show is organized according to educational principles. Barilleaux categorized artworks in groups arranged by the same basic artistic principles he learned in art school: line, value, shape, form, space, texture, color, and pattern. Many of the works could be placed in multiple categories, but Barrileaux aims to draw attention to certain elements of the works.



Katie Pell, "Charm and Weight," 2008, wood, with paint. Collection of the McNay Art Museum, Museum purchase with funds from Rick Liberto, The Smothers Foundation, Lori and Joel Dunlap, Chris Hill and Lachlan Miles, and Guillermo Nicolas and Jim Foster

But to me, the true educational significance of a museum collection is embodied in *Charm and Weight* (2008) by San Antonio artist Katie Pell. Pell was a force unto herself, as anyone who knew her will say, up until the moment she died in 2019 . The McNay acquired this monumental carved wood charm bracelet sculpture in 2021, and it now anchors the sculpture gallery adjacent to the main gallery. It also anchored a recent museum education

program, serving as inspiration for the McNay's 2025-2026 Spotlight series for K-12 kids, with Pell's daughter Bygoe Zubiate — also a San Antonio artist — leading one of the workshops. As Yolanda Urrabazo, McNay's Head of Communications and Marketing, put it, opening the collection in this way gives "so much more meaning to the collection. It just has a huge impact with the community."

Impact beyond the fragile lifespan of an artist, and the career of a curator. In speaking of his career, Barilleaux tends to use collective pronouns, making clear his conviction that building and maintaining a museum and its collection and exhibitions is a collective effort top to bottom, a series of candid personal interactions that ultimately results in an institution's imprimatur. What we can all love is that Katie Pell can live on in the community she called home and left an indelible impression on. What's mind boggling is that each piece in Barilleaux's show, and every single one of the 200-some pieces he acquired during his tenure, can tell a similarly complex, textured, and resonant story.