

Mission Accomplished

Curators, architects, and the State Department

collaborated to showcase American art at the U.S.

Mission to the United Nations **BY NANA ASFOUR**

The recently completed headquarters for the United States Mission to the United Nations, in New York, is a paean to American diplomacy and democracy—as well as American art. The 26-story building, designed by the late Charles Gwathmey of Gwathmey

Founded in 1986 by four wives of former ambassadors, the foundation has collected works by more than 200 American artists, dispersed to over 140 countries. By the time FAPE chair Jo Carole Lauder approached Storr to get advice about art commissions for

bers. Unsatisfied with what was at hand, he reached out to several artists to ask for additional works. Lynda Benglis offered her favorite artwork, *D'Arrest* (2009), an orange, squiggly surfaced half-globe made of polyurethane, which had been installed above her bed. “The whole energy of FAPE is one of sharing,” Benglis says, “and more and more people are beginning to realize that art is a tool for communicating and for politics. Art does give out energy.” Her piece hangs in the 70-foot-high rotunda on the 22nd floor, below a dome that has been covered in rich blue with thin red stripes, conceived by Sol LeWitt, and across from Ron Gorchov’s site-specific *Totem*, a 19-foot obelisk of conjoined canvases painted in the colors of UN members’ flags.

When choosing where to place the artworks, Storr and his colleagues at FAPE had to work closely with the architects and the State Department. The building, says Robert Siegel, the lead architect on the project after the passing of his partner, “has a higher level of criteria than a federal courthouse, in terms of protection—particularly so because it is situated right in the middle of a city, sitting almost literally on a curb on First Avenue” and East 45th Street. The security criteria meant that the structure could have no exterior cladding that could act as shrapnel in the event of an explosion. The

firm settled on a “monolithic” concrete tower. Siegel is particularly proud of the lobby area, where passersby can see the black angular shapes of a Calder sculpture that sharply contrast with the curved architectural space.

“You are dealing with a government building so there are a lot of restrictions,” Storr says of the installation process. But, he insists, “what the State Department did not do is tell us what the art should be.” ■

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▲ The rotunda on the 22nd floor of the new United States Mission to the United Nations features works by Ron Gorchov, Sol LeWitt, and Lynda Benglis (left to right).

Siegel & Associates Architects, houses over 180 works by the country’s most renowned artists—Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Ed Ruscha, and James Rosenquist, to name a few—many of whom offered their art for free.

The artists’ generosity is a testament to the nonprofit organization in charge of placing artworks in American embassies around the world, the Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies (FAPE), whose art advisory committee is currently chaired by Robert Storr, dean of the Yale School of Art.

embassies, some ten years ago, the organization had been allocating art to far-flung consulates for over a decade. “There are some circumstances where one may not want to work for the government,” says Storr. “But it was clear that FAPE was a very mixed group in terms of political orientation—there was no political propaganda at stake—and that it was directly about what was interesting to me, which is the art.”

The collection for the U.S. Mission presented a particular challenge for Storr, who had to wade through a pool of gifts from patrons and board mem-