Turmoil at the Reina Sofia

Once again, a change in leadership at Madrid’s Reina Sofia has been marked by bitter controversy. Recalling the abrupt firings of former directors Tomás Llorens (1991) and Maria Corral (1994), director Juan Manuel Bonet resigned in a huff on May 29. That day, Spanish newspapers announced that he would be replaced by Ana Martínez de Aguilar, 48, director of the Esteban Vicente Museum of Contemporary Art in Segovia. She was selected by Carmen Calvo, the new culture minister appointed by Socialist Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero following his party’s triumph in the national elections in March.

Bonet, appointed in 2000 by the prior (conservative) government, complained in a letter to EZ País that he didn’t understand Calvo’s “absence of tact” or “the hostile and sectarian tone of the minister’s comments” about his tenure. He claimed that in April, when he first read in the press that his job was on the line, he wrote a letter to Calvo offering to help make the transition as smooth as possible for the new director, whoever that might be, but that she didn’t respond to him.

A locally recognized museum professional with a historicist approach to exhibition programming, Bonet has a dubious reputation for dulling two of Spain’s liveliest art museums (prior to the Reina Sofia, he headed IAM, Valencia’s modern art museum). At the Reina Sofia during 2003-04, large-scale overviews were devoted to such artists as Rafael Alberti, André Masson, Juan Gris and Calder, while works by emerging artists were tucked away in a small gallery, and temporary shows by living artists were mounted offsite at the Velázquez and Crystal palaces in Retiro Park.

Even so, Calvo’s choice of the little-known Martínez as director of Spain’s premiere modern art institution sparked an uproar. Critics decried her skimpy credentials; she has curated one exhibition at the museum to wait until the building is finished.

The Reina Sofia controversy is a disappointing debut for Calvo, 47. As the former head of Andalucía’s regional art commission, she received kudos for bringing to fruition the new Picasso museum in Málaga—inaugurated in October 2003—a project that required years of negotiations with Picasso’s surviving relatives.

On June 24, Calvo and Martínez went ahead with preexisting plans to inaugurate the first new galleries of the museum’s huge addition with a Lichtenstein survey, even though the addition is still under construction. The move was met with complaints from all quarters, including architect Jean Nouvel, who has watched the museum to wait until the building was finished. —Kim Bradley

Artist Ensnared by Patriot Act

Since May, Buffalo artist Steve Kurtz has been the subject of a highly publicized federal investigation involving his possession of bacterial agents and lab equipment. The trouble began on May 11, when the artist awoke to find that his wife, Hope, was dead. After emergency workers arrived, they discovered what they considered to be suspicious items and called in the FBI. Invoking a 1989 bioterrorism law and the Patriot Act, which grants the federal government unprecedented search-and-seizure powers, federal agents detained Kurtz for 22 hours; they searched his home for two days, as well as his office at SUNY-Buffalo, where he is a faculty member. The bureau confiscated his wife’s body, his house, car, equipment, computer hard drive, books, writings, correspondence, art projects and other items, even his cat. His house, cat and car were returned to him after one week, once it was determined that his wife’s death was an accident.

Kurtz’s detractors called for the museum to wait until the building was finished. —Kim Bradley

New Jersey’s 9/11 Memorial

Governor James McGreevey of New Jersey recently announced that a proposal by architect Frederic Schwartz has won the state’s September 11th Memorial Competition. Titled Empty Sky, the project is a tribute to the nearly 700 New Jersey residents killed in the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The New York-based architect was a member of the “Think” team of architects and designers who were finalists in the competition for the new World Trade Center [see “Front Page,” Feb. ’03], which was ultimately won by Daniel Libeskind. Schwartz was also selected earlier this year to design a 9/11 memorial for Westchester County’s victims.

Produced in collaboration with Massachusetts-based architect Jessica Jamroz, the design was selected from 320 initial proposals, narrowed down to six finalists, and chosen by a panel of 12 family members of victims. The design features two parallel, stainless-steel walls, each 30 feet high and 200 feet long (the width of each WTC tower). Symbolizing the Twin Towers, the walls will be engraved with the names of each victim in 4-inch letters. The walls are to be situated 16 feet apart...
**Auction Houses in Full Boom**

This past spring and summer, art auction totals went through the roof at sales in the U.S. and abroad. New York’s important evening auctions of Impressionist, modern and contemporary art at the city’s two biggest houses, Christie’s and Sotheby’s, were the most successful in years. Sotheby’s came on top, realizing $403.6 million, including the $104.3 million for a single painting, Picasso’s 1905 Boy with a Pipe [See “Artword,” June/July ’04]. The total was greater than the house’s $244.1-million fall earnings, and far outshone its $123.6-million take a year ago. Christie’s also had a strong season, pulling in $204.6 million. The figure was somewhat below the $223.5-million total the company garnered in the fall, but far surpassed its $161.5-million earnings last year. Christie’s was also responsible this season for realizing the first-ever $100-million auction of postwar and contemporary art, on the evening of May 11. Participating only in the contemporary-art arena, Phillips, de Pury & Co. (the new company name resulting from the departure of Daniele Luxembourg early in the spring) pulled in $25.9 million. Final prices quoted here include the auction house commissions: Sotheby’s and Phillips, de Pury & Co. charge 20 percent of the first $100,000 and 12 percent of the rest; Christie’s commission is 19.5 percent of the first $100,000 and 12 percent of any amount beyond that. Estimates do not reflect commissions.

**Impressionist and Modern**

The season opener, Christie’s evening sale of Impressionist and modern art on May 4, was not a resounding success, although it achieved some record-breaking prices. The night’s total, $56.6 million, was below the $64.9-million low estimate, and seven of the 39 works offered failed to sell. Considerable excitement, however, was generated by six works being deaccessioned by the Museum of Modern Art to support its acquisitions fund. One of these, The Great Metaphysician, a landmark 1917 painting by Giorgio de Chirico, was the evening’s star lot. A tall canvas showing an abstracted figure towering above a starkly lit Renaissance piazza, the work sold for $7.2 million, within its $7–10-million presale estimate. A large, stunning Redon pastel still life from the collection of the late Doris Duke, Vase with Japanese Warrior (ca. 1905), brought $3.8 million, well above its $3-million high estimate, and a record auction price for the artist. Tamara de Lempicka’s auction record was broken when her 1929 Portrait of Mrs. Bush brought a whopping $4.6 million (est. $1.2–1.6 million).

The following evening’s auction at Sotheby’s was an historic event. A single-owner sale of works from the collection of the late Mr. and Mrs. John Hay Whitney, undertaken to benefit the Whitney family’s philanthropic GreenTree Foundation, the auction garnered a staggering $189.9 million. The total was significantly greater than the evening’s $157-million high estimate, and only two of the 34 lots offered were bought in.
Although Picasso’s Boy with a Pipe attracted the most press attention, having brought the largest sum ever paid for a work at auction, the sale featured numerous huge prices and several other record-breaking lots.

The evening’s second-highest seller was Manet’s 1872 equestrian painting, Races at the Bois de Boulogne, which sold for a hefty $26.3 million (est. $20-30 million). Another large painting of horses, Alfred J. Munnings’s The Red Prince Mare (1921), trounced its $6-million high estimate to sell for $7.8 million, the artist’s highest auction price to date. Among the sale’s other highlights were two still lifes: Bazille’s lush Pot of Flowers (1866), which garnered $5.3 million (est. $4-6 million), a record auction price for the artist, and Picasso’s vibrant 1944 Tomato Plant, which shot past its $4-million high estimate to sell for $6.8 million. One of the evening’s rarest gems was William Blake’s visionary work on paper The Good and Evil Angels Struggling for the Possession of a Child (1795-1805). Soaring high above its $1.5-million high estimate, the work sold for $3.9 million, another artist auction record.

Riding the wave of success of the W. H. Inlay sale, Sotheby’s auction of Impressionist and modern art, on May 6, was also strong. The night’s $96.1-million total was near the $99-million high estimate, and 42 of 52 lots offered sold. The top lot, Monet’s large Water Lilies (1917-19), from the collection of Fran and Ray Stark, realized $16.8 million, well above its $12-million high estimate. Picasso’s 1932 painting The Rescue was knocked down for $14.8 million (est. $10-15 million), and another Picasso, a large Seated Nude (1959), blasted its $3.4-million high estimate, selling for $11.8 million. A large canvas by Balbuz, Golden Afternoon (1957), showing a young girl reclining by a window, brought $3.8 million (est. $4-6 million), a record auction price for the artist.

Contemporary
The extraordinary strength of Impressionist and modern works this past spring helped turn up the heat in the contemporary-art field, which was already sizzling in the past few seasons. The result was a record-breaking evening for postwar and contemporary art at Christie’s on May 11, which brought in $102.1 million, approaching the night’s record-breaking evening for postwar and contemporary art at Christie’s.

Among the many other notable lots, Rothko’s large canvas No. 15 (1958) brought $9 million (est. $8-12 million) and Andy Warhol’s Self-Portrait (1967), with a bright blue face and green background, sold for $6.9 million (est. $6-8 million). The Jeff Koons bourbon-filled, stainless-steel sculpture Jim Beam J.B. Turner Train (1986) zoomed past its $3-million high estimate to bring $3.5 million. A recent painting by Koons, Saint Benedict (2000), brought a whopping $1.7 million, far above its $650,000 high estimate.

New artist auction records were established for Ed Ruscha, whose painting Damage (1964) was knocked down for $3.6 million (est. $1.8-2.5 million), and Chuck Close, whose large 1982 canvas Gwynne sold for $2.8 million (est. $2.5-3.5 million). Joan Mitchell’s large painting Dégel (1961-62) brought $1.5 million, roughly double its $700,000 high estimate, and Dan Flavin’s Alternate Diagonals of March 2, 1964 (to Don Judd), 1964, realized $679,500 (est. $350,000-450,000), new auction highs for both artists.

Building on the momentum of the Christie’s sale, Sotheby’s contemporary-art auction the following evening was even more feverish. The sale garnered $65.7 million, beyond the evening’s $65.4-million high estimate. All 58 works offered sold — 22 for more than $1 million — and 13 new artist auction records were established. Top lot was a classic Roy Lichtenstein Pop painting, Step on Can with Leg (1961), which brought $5.1 million (est. $4-5 million).

Other big prices included $2.9 million paid for Ellsworth Kelly’s 1971 painting Chatham Xllll: Yellow Red (est. $1.2-1.8 million) and $1.6 million for Claes Oldenburg’s 1961 plaster relief Sewing Machine (est. $500,000-700,000); record auction prices for both artists.

Maurizio Cattelan’s auction record was smashed when his The Ballad of Trotsky, a 1996 sculpture consisting of a taxidermied horse suspended from the ceiling, sold for $2.1 million, more than double its $800,000 high estimate. James Rosenquist’s painting Air Hammer (1962) brought $512,000 (est. $500,000-600,000), and Rachel Whiteread’s colorful untitled 1995 resin sculpture garnered $478,400 (est. $400,000-600,000), two more auction bests.

The season ended the following evening with Phillips, de Pury & Co.’s lively sale of contemporary art, which realized $17.8 million, near the night’s $17.5-million high estimate. Of the 63 works offered, 59 sold, and 10 new artist auction records were established in the process. The top lot, Jean-Michel Basquiat’s large 1983 canvas Blue Heads, sold for $2 million (est. $1.8-2.5 million). Marlene Dumas’s painting Young Boys (1993) clobbered its $350,000 high estimate to sell for $993,600, and Bridget Riley’s diamond-shaped 1964 Op art painting Serf went for $792,000 (est. $500,000-700,000), setting new auction highs for those artists.

Christopher Wool’s untitled 1990 five-panel painting, featuring the words “run dog run,” brought $848,000 (est. $500,000-700,000), an auction record for the artist. Another word painting set a new auction high for Richard Prince, when his “joke” diptych My Name (1987), a large gray monochrome work, inscribed with orange block letters reading “I never had a penny to my name so I changed my name,” fetched $747,200, far above its $200,000 high estimate.

— David Ebony