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timesunion

UAlbany art museum marks its 50th year

Venue helped energize local art scene

By Amy Biancolli on October 22, 2017



Jason Middlebrook's "Live with Less," his 2009 installation at the UAM (image courtesy University at Albany / University Art Museum)

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Fifty years ago, an airy new venue for contemporary art opened up in Albany, one among the many modernist structures sprawled in the new uptown SUNY campus designed by the architect Edward Durell Stone.

The museum was spacious and bright with windows, light spilling into upstairs and downstairs galleries ringing an open, soaring atrium that reached 35 feet to the roof. Its inaugural exhibit, which opened Oct. 5, 1967, featured paintings and sculptures from the collection of Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, the governor of New York and the state's most famous patron of abstract-expressionist artwork.

"It really changed the contemporary landscape for our region — really, forever," said Tammis K. Groft, executive director of the Albany Institute of History and Art, the venerable museum best known for its cultural artifacts and collection of 19th-century Hudson River School paintings.

SUNY's new cultural bastion of poured concrete cracked open a local arts scene more focused on the past than the present and future: the Institute was the old guard, slanted toward history.

In the years since UAM opened, several regional havens for contemporary art have sprung into being. Among them: Albany Center Gallery in 1977. The Rice Gallery at the Albany Institute of History & Art, 1982. Mass MoCA, 1999. The Tang, 2000. The Opalka Gallery at Sage, 2002.

"There are many more organizations focused on contemporary art" around the region these days, said Janet Riker, former director. "We've always felt like we've had a particular niche in terms of leadership in the contemporary arts community." Exhibiting art at the vanguard "said that this is important for you to look at, and consider, and think about. So I think by presenting it, it calls attention to the artwork and says: 'This deserves your consideration.'"

The new fine arts headquarters at SUNY Albany brought in prominent art professors and promising students to the region, Groft said, all of them traversing the cutting — and changing — edge of modernism. And something else happened. "People stayed," she said. "The artists stayed. They continued working in the region, made their homes here, and it really created a very vibrant contemporary art community."

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Added William B. Hedberg, senior vice provost, vice president and an administrator since 1970: "The museum space was designed as part of a modern, space-age campus, so I think it's always had a contemporary focus." Over the years the school has retained and emphasized that focus, "trying to use the museum as an agent for creating a culture of new ideas. It's the language that we put around it."

Thom O'Connor, a professor emeritus and artist who has exhibited his own work there many times, boils the museum's mission and impact to one word. The museum is, he said, "about now. What's happening."

A full 50 years' worth of now is on display in UAM's current exhibition, a retrospective from its permanent collection that follows the fluid edge of art from late-1960s abstract expressionism to the genre-bending, discipline-crossing innovators of today. Culled from around 3,000 pieces, the exhibit evokes the history of the UAM and late-20th-century American art while it conjures, inevitably, the era in art and politics that spawned it.

Rockefeller died in 1979, 12 years after the inaugural reception where he addressed the crowd from the museum's balustrade railing. But in a sense his presence still looms, having shaped the campus with his own passion for modernism and filled its Fine Arts building with works from his own collection.

"He was a pretty savvy guy, pretty easy-going, and obviously loved art," said O'Connor, who visited Rockefeller in his offices and helped select artworks for the inaugural show. "I mean, he was crazy about art."

In an email, Rockefeller biographer Richard Norton Smith ("On His Own Terms: A Life of Nelson Rockefeller," 2014 Random House) described a zeal that went beyond the assemblage of works for his own benefit.

"Rockefeller loved sharing his art as much as he did collecting it in the first place. At heart he was a teacher, equally comfortable explaining Cubism as the need to raise taxes or pass a bond issue," he said, adding that the governor enjoyed leading legislators on tours of his Pollocks and

Picassos. "So it was only natural that his enthusiasm for sharing should spill over to include public galleries in Albany."

That same enthusiasm also cleared 40 blocks downtown, built the Empire State Plaza, amassed its assemblage of abstract-expressionist masterworks and helped fueled the expansion and modernization of the entire SUNY system. "This idea of having a museum – and it was his vision, at that time, that it be a contemporary-art venue – as part of public education at a higher institution is really a pretty amazing and significant contribution, and has been a lasting contribution to this campus, certainly," said Corinna Ripps Schaming, curator and interim director.

In the five decades since its maiden exhibition, the University Art Museum built its sizeable collection — "a big chunk of it" now found in public spaces at the uptown, downtown and East Greenbush campuses, Hedberg said. Two prints by Robert Motherwell hang outside the provost's office.

In that same span of time, the facility mounted 400 shows in its galleries, bringing in art from around campus, the region and farther reaches. In December of 1967, for its second-ever exhibit, UAM showcased the work of Jack Bosson and Australian painters. In 1972, German activist and avant-gardist Hans Richter. In 1981, a retrospective of American-Italian realist O. Louis Guglielmi. In 1986, photo collages by influential English pop-art icon David Hockney.

In 1996, UAM was among the first American venues to exhibit Xu Bing's "A Book from the Sky," which blanketed floors, walls and ceiling with books and scrolls. In 2008, for "Plan C," Niskayuna native David Opdyke strung 2,000 paper airplanes across the space, exploiting its 35-foot ceiling. The effect, Riker said, was "magnificent."

But about that ceiling.

From the start, the space itself was a bit of a challenge — "interesting," in Hedberg's view. O'Connor recalled that its wide-open, high-reaching layout prompted some surprise, and maybe a little bafflement, back in 1967. "Now it's sort of old hat, but when it was opening, people thought

it was bizarre — 'Wow, this is a strange place, all the windows. Where are we gonna have all the art?'"

But the work of curation, always a matter of trouble-shooting, means accommodating both the space and the artists. "It's not just hanging a work on a wall anymore," Ripps Schaming said. It's a matter, Riker agreed, "of going where the artists want to go."

Sometimes, straight up. **In 2009, the museum presented "Live with Less," Jason Middlebrook's exploration of refuse and mindfulness in an age of consumption. For the show he rounded up cardboard from around campus and piled it — or planned to — from floor to ceiling. But cardboard and gravity had other ideas.**

"There's no way you can really stack cardboard that high," Riker said. The logistical pickle required some problem solving. "It was, 'That's just — you want to do what?' But I think that's what artists do. They take you where you really didn't think you could (go)."

The answer: hang the cardboard from top to bottom. Using, not fighting, the gravity.

"You know, that space — it creates some serious architectural challenges," Middlebrook said. "But I was excited about the idea of it being open, with that kind of catwalk around it. So I had to come up with a solution that was gonna address all that negative space and all that vertical space."

The venue's unusual configuration, and its commitment to pushing envelopes, create a "dynamic" institution for contemporary art, he said. "That museum — they take a lot of chances. ... I really think the museum has a profound effect beyond the student body."

A few years after his show at UAlbany, Middlebrook exhibited at Mass MoCA — overlapping with Xu Bing's "Phoenix." "Over the last 10 or 15 years I've been struck by the number of contemporary artists who've had exhibitions at the museum and then, three or four years later, they're featured at Mass MoCA. We seem to have a knack for catching people on the way up," Hedberg said.

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On the UAlbany campus, Ripps Schaming said, the museum aims to serve the community beyond students already enrolled in the arts — drawing in others with interdisciplinary assignments and other curricular efforts at a school known for nanotech and innovation. "It's really important for people to understand that research and development extend to all disciplines — and that they're very much a part of what the visual arts do," she said. "We develop new ideas."

If most of the undergraduates walking past the museum on a recent Thursday had never set foot in it — "it needs more advertisement," one suggested — its mission remains campus- and community-wide. "We have to be intentional about helping our students to appreciate it," Hedberg said.

Tilting toward the future, Ripps Schaming said, the UAlbany museum aims to reflect the ever-increasing diversity of the student body and the world at large. "We bring voices from any and all populations into the museum world," she said, expanding beyond "white male artists" to "this expanded field of both gender and race and every possible constituency."

Looking ahead, she said, the museum needs to keep true to its original conception — "that's pretty much what we're still doing, in just different iterations." Or, as Riker put it: "We have to remain nimble. We have to listen to artists. We have to follow where the art leads, and present it in the very best way we can — to reach out and bring audiences to experience the work in as many different ways as we can think of. ... I think we have to be good stewards."

And the now keeps changing. In 2014, artist Mary Reid Kelley incorporated video into her show at UAlbany, deploying elements of sculpture, costume design and digital media in works far removed from the austerity and abstractness of the late-1960s.

So it has to be asked: What would Rocky think? What if, say, he zapped into the present from 1967 and slipped through the doors of UAM?

"I would have to think that he would have looked — or would look at this work — and see it as part of this moment," Ripps Schaming said. The art-crazed governor of New York "had this incredible collection, this painting and sculpture, that was being made at that moment. So it wasn't

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as if he was coming here to the museum and saying, 'We're gonna show, you know, Impressionist paintings.' So the sense is that he was tapping into something then – and that was his predilection.

He mostly likely would still be tapping into something new."

Hedberg doesn't doubt it, either. "I think," he said, "Nelson Rockefeller would be very pleased."