

In Santa Fe, a New Museum Brings the Local Art Scene Up to Date

The first show at the new Vladem Contemporary, which opened last month, spotlights works from 1970 to 2000 and centers on New Mexico artists.

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In some ways, the original New Mexico Museum of Art was too much of a good thing. The building, located just off the historic Santa Fe Plaza, is a prime example of the Pueblo Revival style of architecture that defines the capital and makes it a popular destination for tourists. Covered in earthy, brown stucco, and with roof timbers protruding through its exterior walls, the 1917 structure is decorated along doorways, stairs and ceilings with intricately carved wood trim.

All of those design details were just right for the art the museum was collecting in the first half of the 20th century. The building's local flavor enhanced the work of painters like Marsden Hartley, Georgia O'Keeffe and others who became famous for capturing the nearby land, sky and people.

But art has evolved over the years. Abstraction, conceptualism, installations and video grew to become the dominant American art as the century closed, and none of it presented well in the old space. The building and all of its endearing adornments "became a distraction" for objects better exhibited in a windowless, white cube, said the museum's director Mark A. White.





Nancy Holt's "Mirrors of Light II" (1974) is one of the works being featured in the Vladem Contemporary's opening show, "Shadow and Light." The Vladem Contemporary — officially the New Mexico Museum of Art Vladem Contemporary — a satellite museum the state built across town in Santa Fe's Railyard Arts District, is meant to solve the problem. The \$20.2 million project, which opened Sept. 23, has a more modern personality, with an open floor plan, high ceilings and controlled lighting that mirrors the flexible, stripped-down gallery style that is common today.

"Good architecture should just be a stage," said Devendra Contractor, whose firm, DNCA Architects, partnered with the Albuquerque-based Studio GP Architect in executing the design that was attractive but did not steal attention from the art. "Then when human occupation occurs, the building should disappear."

The museum's curators are using the Vladem's opening show, "Shadow and Light," as a way of making up for lost exhibition time. The offering is spread throughout all of the building's 35,000 square feet and spotlights many objects made from 1970 to 2000, centering on landmark New Mexico figures like Agnes Martin, Judy Chicago, Larry Bell and Nancy Holt.

"This was the only way that we were going to be able to do that period of New Mexico art history justice," said Mr. White, during a tour of the museum last month. "Because so much happened in those three decades."



The museum's high ceilings and controlled lighting, above, resemble the stripped-down gallery style that is common today.

The show is rounded out with works by more recent names affiliated with the state, such as Leo Villareal and Virgil Ortiz.

Mr. Villareal's piece gets at the heart of how the museum wants the public to experience both the inside and outside of the new building. Like much of the artist's work — he is most famous for a light sculpture he created for the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge — it is made from thousands of tiny, flashing LED nodes, and it is installed under a breezeway on the building's exterior. The idea is that people do not necessarily have to enter the museum's galleries, and pay the admission price, to experience all of its offerings.

"It will be on 24 hours a day" for people to enjoy, Mr. White said. The breezeway, which connects the galleries to the museum's gift shop, links to a stop of the high-speed train between Santa Fe and Albuquerque, called the Rail Runner Express, so scores of commuters will walk through it regularly.

There is also a street-facing "video window" that will show new works in the twilight hours. The museum's lobby is open to the public free of charge and will be programmed with changing installations.



Leo Villareal's permanent digital light installation, "Astral Array," is installed under the breezeway that connects the galleries to the museum's gift shop.

First up is an augmented reality piece created in partnership with Ms. Chicago that is based on "Kitty City," a series of paintings and ceramic cat sculptures she produced from 1999 to 2004. Visitors experience it by putting on a headset, which allows them to see four digitally produced cats walking through the space.

"It's really an examination of our relationship with other species and the bonds that can develop," said Ms. Chicago, who moved with her husband, the photographer Donald Woodman, to the town of Belen, N.M., in the early 1990s.

The cats are modeled after actual pets the couple owned — Ms. Chicago complained that one of the felines, named Inka, was not fat enough so its size was adjusted — and lead young visitors to the museum on an art scavenger hunt. It was Mr. White's idea to reimagine the work and the artist decided it was worth a try. "It's another way to bring people into the museum, and so I thought that was great," she said in a telephone interview.

While the museum has a statewide outlook, officials expect it will give a boost to both culture and tourism in Santa Fe, which markets itself as a premier visual arts destination. The building — named for Robert and Ellen Vladem who contributed \$4 million of the \$10.6 million raised for construction — was purposefully located in the Railyard Arts District, which has emerged over the past decade as the trendy neighborhood for cutting-edge art. Several of the city's top commercial art galleries are in the district, along with Site Sante Fe, a nonprofit museum known for exhibiting global names in contemporary art.



Works by the artist Virgil Ortiz from left, “Recon Corvis,” “Meecona.” “Leviathan: Plight of the Recon Watchmen,” “Recon Grus,” “Jai Nopek,” and “Mitz Nopek.”

Still, in some ways, the Vladem pays tribute to old Santa Fe and its signature adobe-inspired architecture. It is made of glass and steel like most new museums, but unlike them, it is painted the city’s trademark earthy brown, a characteristic local historic preservation authorities insisted upon, Mr. Contractor said. It is only two stories tall, in line with the city’s low-rise nature.

The design concept connects the existing and new, as well. The first floor of the museum was converted from a warehouse that was built in the 1930s and formerly housed the state’s record center and archives. Mr. Contractor’s design added a bridge-like second story, which sits on top of the original structure and wraps down its north and south sides, an idea the architect compares to “cupping one hand over another.”



Yayoi Kusama's "Pumpkin" is one of many works on display at the museum.

The addition is narrower than the old structure, and is set over it at about a 15-degree angle. That design move allowed some of the original building's roof to remain uncovered and that portion of the roof was converted into an outdoor deck that can host museum functions and events, such as weddings.

The deck combined with other spaces — in addition to the open lobby and breezeway, there is an expansive classroom with closets full of child-friendly art supplies — will give people multiple ways to interact with the new building.

"The idea is that we would not only be showing contemporary art, but letting the museum also have a kind of social function," Mr. White said. "We want it to be a hub for community activity."

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