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Datebook



MoAD reopens doors, widens vision

Museum of the
African Diaspora
reveals its new look

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WELCOME

A new vision for MoAD



Just in time for its 50th anniversary celebration, San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora is re-opening this week with a new look — and a far-reaching vision for the future. "Since opening in 2005, MoAD has turned a striking face outward, with the large photo mural of a youthful African child peering out from far away onto Mission Street," says Susan Winn, who wrote about the museum's evolution for this week's cover story. "Visitors who came closer and came inside discovered that that single face is composed of hundreds of smaller ones, in a global mosaic of migration over the centuries. But for too much of its own history, MoAD has struggled to find an identity, an audience and stable leadership behind the mural."

Now, after a six-month closure, the museum has been smartly renovated and is moving forward with Executive Director Linda Harrison at the helm and a fresh focus on both internally curated and touring shows.

"A new affiliation with the Smithsonian is another salutary development," Winn says. "MoAD has positioned itself to be seen in a way that the inspired face of a child has always promised."

See Winn's story on Page 14.

Next week: New board games for the holidays.

Sue Adolphson, Sunday Datebook editor

November 30-December 6, 2014 | SAN FRANCISCO

CONTENTS

11.30-12.06



Cover story

16 The Museum of the African Diaspora reveals its slick, transitional — and Executive Director Linda Harrison's ambitious plans for growth.

Movies

20 Jan-31 and Ho

Music

32 Singer a plays a

Theater

34 Cyndi L theara

COVER STORY



MoAD Executive Director Linda Harrison shows off the second floor, where the improvements include the lecture hall's wall replaced by glass.



Peter Finzler's "Family on the Beach" (above) is among the new art that will be at the Museum of the African Diaspora.

A new era as MoAD nears 10th birthday

By Steven Winn

More dramatic changes are approved on the museum's second floor. Two-time award-winning exhibits — the "Columbian Circle" and "Harley Pongracz" — will be replaced by new ones. The new glass wall will be replaced by glass. The museum's new status as a Smithsonian Affiliate. Partnering with the powerful Washington, D.C., institution will give MoAD access to the Smithsonian's immense resources and expertise. Benefits include touring exhibitions, object loans, and visiting scholars and speakers.

Visitors to the refurbished Museum of the African Diaspora, which reopens this week after six months of construction and renovation, will know immediately that a new chapter has arrived. In the 9-year-old institution, it begins just inside the front door. What was once a cramped, cluttered entryway has been opened out, as part of a \$1.1-million project by the San Francisco architect and design firm Condit + Partners, a multi-purpose space that takes full advantage of natural light from the building's glass facade on Mission Street near Third Street. Banks of interactive tablets, custom-made seating near the windows, a large video screen and a renovated gift shop share the museum's light and airy street level. An L-shaped hallway that connects to the adjacent St. Francis Hotel has been reappointed as the Emerging Artists Gallery. A new glass door to the hotel will offer glimpses of the art on display and invite lobby visitors to come from that side and explore.

The Museum of the African Diaspora reopens Wednesday, Dec. 3. The first two exhibitions are "Lava Thomas Beyond" (through April 5) and "Diogenes: Grupo Antillano and the Art of Afro-Cuba" (through Jan. 4). \$10. 2055 Mission St., S.F. 4151. 350-7200. www.moadd.org.

Long-term thinking

Important as these structural changes may be, they are emblematic of some deeper long-term thinking. Under Executive Director Linda Harrison, who has been on the job for about a year, MoAD hopes to assert itself with more wide-ranging and vital programming. Central to that initiative is the museum's new status as a Smithsonian Affiliate. Partnering with the powerful Washington, D.C., institution will give MoAD access to the Smithsonian's immense resources and expertise. Benefits include touring exhibitions, object loans, and visiting scholars and speakers.

The advantages are mutual. "We're very interested in having a presence with this institution in San Francisco," said Laura Hansen, national outreach manager for Smithsonian Affiliations. The staff affiliates include the Oakland Museum in Oakland and the Mexican Museum in San Francisco. Affiliates pay \$100,000 to the Smithsonian in part-year fees.

Hansen mentioned one Smithsonian center that may make a showing at MoAD. "The Will to Arise" is an ongoing project on African American dress and identity. While this new arrangement, begun over the summer, promises to bolster MoAD, Harrison and her staff have no intention of becoming simply a venue for touring shows. One of the re-branded museum's first two shows, "Lava Thomas Beyond," showcases a Bay Area artist. The artist, Diogenes, is "educated at Harvard, was very the origin and influence of the group and 'Don African' Group. And since MoAD will partner with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, we will present show," Harrison, a Chicago native with a long business background but no prior museum experience, sees her role as one of forging a clear and pervasive identity for MoAD. "Everything we do," she said, "whether it's our exhibitions, our public programs or how we share our knowledge with education, has to be four through when it's provocative and relevant."

"An museum we're competing with all sorts of entertainment. We've got to be able to shift and engage with people in a variety of ways."

Six directors Harrison and carry-through will be important for a museum that has had six directors (including interim ones) opening less than a decade ago and struggled to attract visitors. An earlier museum, with an annual budget of around \$1.3 million, MoAD closed a record annual attendance of 200,000, in the most recent figures. Harrison would also give the budget \$10 million to help maintain and increase attendance to 300,000 to 400,000. Another goal is to raise \$10 million in private donations. Harrison began as a volunteer and rose to high-level positions at Eastman Kodak, Pfizer and Sotheby's international realty division. "When you are a very large corporation, she said, "you have to be flexible, entrepreneurial and able to pivot quickly. I think those qualities are important to nonprofits as well."



The Museum of the African Diaspora reopens Wednesday, Dec. 3, after a six-month restoration. MoAD continues on page 18.

COVER STORY

Work rooted in biography

By Steven Winn

Raised in Los Angeles, Lava Thomas spent a lot of time at her grandmother's beauty salon. "I grew up in that shop," the Menlo Park resident said in an article revealed recently. "My grandmother cut and styled hair. She also dispensed a lot of wisdom." Those two memories are woven into "David Scott," a 12-foot-long portrait of a man that uses images of hair as a kind of calligraphy, reminiscent of Chinese and Japanese ink work. In "A Preoccupation With Needles," Thomas studies a strand of hair with both knitting needles and one hypodermic syringe. That's a tribute to her great-grandmother, who was both an avid knitter and a diabetic.

Both of these autobiographically rooted works are included in "Lava Thomas: Beyond," one of two shows that will inaugurate the expanded and reconfigured gallery spaces at the Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD). The museum reopens this week after a six-month closure.

Legacy of Caribbean artists

The Thomas exhibition shares rock-staring homes with "Diogenes: Grupo Antillano and the Art of Afro-Cuba." The show's paintings and sculptures, including a proud but suffering wooden angel streaked with the colors of the Cuban flag, celebrate the art and legacy of an influential group of artists and '60s Caribbean artists. The word "diogenes," a bogus scientific term of the mid-20th century, referred to a slave's compulsion to escape. Thomas' art is at once personal and outward-directed.



David Scott, above, by Lava Thomas, top left.

Her various "project-based" endeavors include one on veterans that began on the commute to her studio.

"There was a particular place where I had to make a left-hand turn," Thomas said, "and there would always be a homeless vet or two there pushing him. You don't see a lot of that in Menlo Park. You don't see the underbelly. Silicon Valley is squeaky clean."

With a commission from the Palo Alto Art Center, Thomas interviewed and videotaped veterans, who opened up to her about job, homelessness, suicide and sexual harassment. The portraits of them she subsequently drew addressed her interest in "how a specific shared experience shapes a group's identity." A similar project with children, she said, explored "what dreams and aspirations we have when we're young and how those things change in adulthood."

For her MoAD show, Thomas is combining early work from the mid-1960s with a new installation piece, the later in the smaller of the two second-floor galleries. The thematic throughline is what the artist called "the experience of ordinary women who often get ignored, women whose sacrifice



"Lava," above, by Lava Thomas, top left.

and hard work make the success and achievement of their progeny possible."

Enchanted at LACMA

Raised by her grandmother and her sisters, Thomas, whose given first name is Lavayell, followed a similar arc. Enchanted by the art she saw at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art as a child, she remembered thinking "if there's a way I can do this, this is what I want to do." But as a working mother herself, she didn't have the means to study art until later, first at UCLA and then at the California College of Arts and Crafts (now the California Col-

lege of the Arts) in Oakland. The 40-photographic "Cloud Pictorial" in Thomas' installation are both a response to her grandmother's belief in a transcendent afterlife and what the artist calls "a metaphor for the time we spend online." The gallery will also be lit with 100 tarbores, many with blue heads. Whatever their connection to the clouds on the wall may be in the viewer's eye, they are sure to make a joyful noise in MoAD's new gallery. ■

Steven Winn is a freelance writer. E-mail: swinn@sfgate.com

New era begins at MoAD

MoAD from page 17

management positions at Eastman Kodak, Pfizer and Sotheby's international realty division. "When you are a very large corporation, she said, "you have to be flexible, entrepreneurial and able to pivot quickly. I think those qualities are important to nonprofits as well."

'Out of the box'

Harrison, 60, cheerfully described herself as "an out-of-the-box candidate" for the MoAD position. She moved to San Francisco several years ago and has served on several nonprofit boards, including that of Frameline, which mounts the San Francisco International LGBT Film Festival.

That experience may be as important as Harrison's business acumen. Frameline underwent leadership and board changes during her tenure. Now she's a new leader charged with revitalizing MoAD as its 10th anniversary approaches.

Becoming more vibrant

"I want to use what I know to support and help this museum that I believe and that welcomes everyone," she said. "That means establishing our personality, becoming more vibrant and connecting with people in a personal way." Drawn from the museum's archives, the first show is the new Emerging Artists Gallery captures Harrison's game plan as well as anything. The theme, she said, is "finding the T in Diogenes." ■

Steven Winn is a freelance writer. E-mail: swinn@sfgate.com

MoAD reopens with big changes and big plans

Wednesday, November 26, 2014

By Steven Winn

Visitors to the refurbished **Museum of the African Diaspora**, which reopens this week after six months of construction and other changes, will know immediately that a new chapter has arrived for the 9-year-old institution. It begins just inside the front door.

What was once a cramped, constricted entryway has been opened out, as part of a \$1.3 million project by the San Francisco architecture and design firm **Gensler**, into an inviting multipurpose space that takes full advantage of natural light from the building's glass facade on Mission Street near Third. Banks of interactive tablets, common-area seating near the windows, a large video screen and a reconceived gift shop share the museum's light and airy street level.

An L-shaped hallway that connects to the adjacent St. Regis Hotel has been repurposed as the Emerging Artists Gallery. A new glass door to the hotel will afford glimpses of the art on display and invite lobby strollers to enter from that side and explore.

More dramatic changes are apparent on the museum's second floor. Two time-worn "permanent" exhibits — the "Celebration Circle" and "Slavery Passages" oral history piece — have been removed in favor of two new galleries, a refreshed performance and lecture salon with a new glass wall, and a snug 28-seat theater for film and video programs.

Long-term thinking

Important as these structural changes may be, they are emblematic of some deeper long-term thinking. Under Executive Director **Linda Harrison**, who has been on the job for about a year, MoAD hopes to assert itself with more wide-ranging and vital programming. Central to that initiative is

the museum's new status as a Smithsonian Affiliate. Partnering with the powerful Washington, D.C., institution will give MoAD access to the Smithsonian's enormous resources and expertise. Benefits include touring exhibitions, object loans, and visiting scholars and speakers.

The advantages are mutual. "We're very interested in having a presence with this museum in San Francisco," said **Laura Hansen**, national outreach manager for Smithsonian Affiliations. The 196 affiliates include the **Blackhawk Museum** in Danville, the **Chabot Space and Science**



Center in Oakland and the Mexican Museum in San Francisco. Affiliates pay \$3,000 to the Smithsonian to participate.

Hansen mentioned one Smithsonian venture that may make a showing at MoAD. “The Will to Adorn” is an ongoing project on African American dress and identity.

While this new arrangement, forged over the summer, promises to bolster MoAD, Harrison and her staff have no intention of becoming simply a venue for touring shows. One of the relaunched museum’s first two shows, “Lava Thomas: Beyond,” showcases a Bay Area artist. The other, “Drapetomania,” originated at Harvard, surveys the origins and influence of the 1970s and ’80s Afro-Cuban Grupo Antillano. MoAD will partner with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on a 2015 portrait show, “Represent.”

Harrison, a Chicago native with a long business background but no prior museum experience, sees her role as one of forging a clear and pervasive identity for MoAD. “Everything we do,” she said, “whether it’s our exhibitions, our public programs or how we share our knowledge with educators, has to be done through a lens that’s provocative and relevant.”

“As a museum we’re competing with all sorts of entertainment. We’ve got to be able to shift and engage with people in a variety of ways.”

Six directors

Know-how and carry-through will be important for a museum that has had six directors (including interims) since opening less than a decade ago and struggled to attract visitors. As a midsize museum, with an annual budget of around \$2.3 million, MoAD achieved a modest annual attendance of 30,000, in the most recent figures.

Harrison would like to grow the budget to \$3 million to \$5 million and increase attendance to 50,000 to 60,000. Another long-term audience-development goal is free admission.

Educated at Chicago’s Loyola University, Harrison began as a sales rep and rose to high-level management positions at Eastman Kodak, Pfizer and Sotheby’s international realty division. “When you are a very large corporation,” she said, “you have to be flexible, entrepreneurial and able to pivot quickly. I think those qualities are important to nonprofits as well.”

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“I want to use what I know to support and help this museum that I adore and that welcomes everyone in,” she said. “That means establishing our personality, becoming more vibrant and connecting with people in a personal way.”

Drawn from the museum's archives, the first show in the new Emerging Artists Gallery captures Harrison's game plan as well as anything. The theme, she said, is "finding the 'I' in Diaspora."

Steven Winn is a freelance writer. E-mail: sadolphson@schronicle.com

The Museum of the African Diaspora reopens Wednesday, Dec. 3. The first two exhibitions are "Lava Thomas: Beyond" (through April 5) and "Drapetomania: Grupo Antillano and the Art of Afro-Cuba" (through Jan. 4). \$10. 685 Mission St., S.F. (415) 358-7200. www.moadsf.org.

<http://www.sfgate.com/art/article/MoAD-reopens-with-big-changes-and-big-plans-5920756.php>

Lava Thomas' art rooted in biography

Saturday, November 29, 2014

By Steven Winn

Raised in Los Angeles, Lava Thomas spent a lot of time at her grandmother's beauty salon. "I grew up in that shop," the Menlo Park multimedia artist recalled recently. "My grandmother cut and styled hair. She also dispensed a lot of wisdom."

Those two memories are woven into "Braid Scroll," a 12-foot-long photo-lithograph that uses images of hair as a kind of calligraphy, reminiscent of Chinese and Japanese ink work. In "A Preoccupation With Needles," Thomas studs a snarl of hair with both knitting needles and one hypodermic syringe. That's a tribute to her great-grandmother, who was both an avid knitter and a diabetic.

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For her MoAD show, Thomas is combining early work from the mid-1990s with a new installation piece, the latter in the smaller of the two second-floor galleries. The thematic throughline is what the artist called "the experience of ordinary women who often get ignored, women whose sacrifice and hard work make the success and achievement of their progeny possible."

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The 40 photographic "Cloud Portraits" in Thomas' installation are both a response to her grandmother's belief in a transcendent afterlife and what the artist calls "a metaphor for the disembodied time we spend online." The gallery will also be hung with 100 tambourines, many with blue heads. Whatever their connection to the clouds on the wall may be in the viewer's eye, they are sure to make a joyful noise in MoAD's new gallery.