

LOS ANGELES: Art and Design Meet at the PDC

For two Thursday evenings this fall, the would-be iconic Pacific Design Center in West Hollywood witnessed an unlikely sight: throngs of savvy art-lovers milling around the cutting-edge galleries that sprawled across the building's second floor, tucked amiably in-between glitzy furniture and design showrooms. Why unlikely? Because until then, odds are that most of the visitors had not set foot in the fabled edifice for years. When it first opened in West Hollywood in 1975, with its striking geometric design by Cesar Pelli, the PDC's signature Blue Building offered a sleekly gargantuan, slickly futuristic silhouette (the Green Building was added in 1988, and the new Red Building opens officially in 2010). But in a tough economy, its vastness became a drawback as numerous showrooms sat vacant and forlorn; cynics called it the Blue Whale.

In early 2009, the center, which was bought a decade ago by real estate developer Charles Cohen, got an aesthetic jumpstart in the person of director/curator Helen Varola, who was brought in to implement a new contemporary arts initiative in all four of Cohen's design centers (besides the PDC, Cohen owns buildings in New York, Florida, and Houston, Texas). Called "Design Loves Art," the program includes as a centerpiece renting empty spaces to select galleries or artists chosen by Varola, for free, on a limited six-month lease that may (or may not) be renewed depending on circumstances, or if other design clients decide to rent the space for real. As long as they remain, the galleries pay the PDC 10% of all sales. There are a few logistical hur-

dles: unlike the rest of the art world, which generally works on a Tuesday-Saturday schedule, the PDC is mostly closed to visitors on weekends and evenings, and parking in the building's garage is not free. Instead of monthly art openings, the administrators have slated five Thursday evening events per year.

As of December, some fifteen different art world tenants had taken over erstwhile showroom spaces in the PDC, mostly on the building's second floor, with a few set off in galleries upstairs. Among the occupants are such smart, respected spaces like Carl Berg Gallery and Donna Napper's "den," which had shut their doors over the past year due to the recession, and other established galleries like Christopher Grimes, Paul Kopeikin and Sam Lee. Lee, who is based in Chinatown, calls his showroom space at the PDC "an incredible opportunity for gaining greater exposure for my artists and gallery." Berg, who has leased two spaces—a vast white-walled space on the second floor in which he was showing large-scale abstract works by Andy Kolar and a stodgy space with tiled floors and painted walls on the third which he calls "almost a provincial museum"—is no less enthusiastic. "It's an opportunity to do really expansive shows, something less conventional than in a [regular] gallery." He notes approvingly that "the owners have made a concerted effort to include art in the building," as with the MOCA satellite branch, and that West Hollywood is "a great area" with such notable galleries as Margo Leavin, Regen Projects, and



Louis Stern. Berg learned about the program through artists Lucas Reiner and John Millei, whose own large project space, called Washington Adams, was among the first to open in the building.

Among the other tenants are Superfront, an architectural-based gallery out of Brooklyn, and MVP, an artist-directed project run by Monique van Genderen and Margo Victor (the central space in their suite was most recently turned over to painter/ceramicist Roger Herman). Notes Victor cheerfully: "For me, it's a project space in which I can have ongoing experiments." As to the building's schedule, she notes, "We've been able to work around it. Rather than an evening opening, we had a lunch." Despite their insider art world credentials, both Victor and van Genderen have embraced the design-art continuum in their work, and clearly welcome the change of venue. "It's good to get away from the rats and heat of Chinatown," van Genderen jokes. "It's a way of coming back," she adds, citing West Hollywood's gallery legacy stretching back to Ferus Gallery days. Art critic Paul Young (who writes for *art ltd.*, among other outlets) used the occasion to launch an ambitious group show of European video art in a plush carpeted showroom; in place of furnishings, he now shows video installations of atmospheric unicorns and plastic soldiers in a popcorn popper. "I could never have done this project any other way. It would have been impossible, unless I had \$100,000." As if attesting to the center's edginess, one showroom was taken over for three weeks by the USC Roski School of Fine Arts for their Fall Senior Show, which in the spirit of cheerful dystopia was titled "Apocalypse WOW!"

"I wanted it to be community-based," affirms program director Varola. "I wanted to select artists who are working locally but engaging a global conversation... It's the strength of the content that has to determine the strength of the program. They're not so much gallery spaces as project spaces, run by artists and galleries." Varola sees the program as nurturing a cross-disciplinary dialogue between art and design, not merely through exhibitions but through educational talks and linkages with cultural institutions, such as MOCA.

In the short term, that programming will come to a very visible head this winter, when the new Art Los Angeles Contemporary (ALAC) art fair makes its debut at the Pacific Design Center from January 28-31. Organized by director Tim Fleming, who previously worked on ART LA, the fair will feature a roster of 50 top galleries that will be "heavy-hitting: small but exclusive," including such prominent dealers as Blum & Poe, Regen Projects, and Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York. The fair will take over the spaces on the second floor currently occupied by the galleries, who will temporarily move upstairs to the fifth floor, then presumably return to their previous sites once the fair has been dismantled. To achieve the transformation, Fleming brought on architects Emily White and Lisa Little of Layer LA; the booths will be grouped throughout the second floor, with several sharing each showroom space. "It will be an alternate model of how you can build a fair: not just in one large space or convention center, but through a series of connected showrooms." Understandably, Fleming is enthusiastic about the PDC, both logistically and symbolically. "The PDC is a basic cultural destination," he says, noting that it will attract "a demographic that would have otherwise never walked into the fair. It goes both ways," he adds, of the art world-design world crossover. "They've been very smart about the 'Design Loves Art' programming. It's more than about showrooms; the fair's another chapter in their mission."

As to the galleries that have helped define LA's newest (albeit provisional) art destination, even if they return to their assumed spaces, most of their six-month leases will expire in late March. Whether they stay on afterward may be dependent on the success of their own exhibitions, and in raising the visibility of the PDC itself. "At the end of March, we'll be reviewing [the leases]," Varola says. "We've stayed in close contact with their programs... They're welcome to stay if their program works."

—GEORGE MELROD

TOP TO BOTTOM:
VISITORS AT CARL BERG GALLERY AMID WORKS BY ANDY KOLAR
CERAMICS BY ROGER HERMAN ON DISPLAY AT MVP
INSTALLATION AT SAM LEE GALLERY

