

MIXING IN THE LAB

By Kyle MacMillan

DENVER — Along with a new leader, the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver has acquired an entire arts organization. The appointment of Adam Lerner, founder and executive director of the Laboratory of Art and Ideas at Belmar, to the post of MCA director has led to the integration of the crosstown institutions. It's a union, Lerner says, that will produce a museum better suited to the 21st century.

The merger will blend the museum's exhibition platform with the Lab's outreach efforts, for which Lerner has earned national attention. "My challenge is not to bring the Lab to the MCA," says Lerner, who replaced former director Cydney Payton last month, but "to find what the MCA's own version of an accessible, engaging, and still serious place will look like."



ADAM LERNER, NEW DIRECTOR OF THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART DENVER.
GRANT LEIGHTON/COURTESY MCA DENVER

Lerner, 42, was previously master teacher for modern and contemporary art at the Denver Art Museum and curator of the Contemporary Museum in Baltimore. Under his direction, the five-year-old Lab, whose building will close at the end of this month, has presented shows by such notable artists as Fang Lijun and Liam Gillick. Its emphasis has been on fun, quirky adult-education programs that many museums have emulated. Its "Mixed Taste" lecture series, for example, paired speakers on deliberately unrelated topics, such as craft beer and Renaissance polyphony.

The 13-year-old MCA, a noncollecting institution, is more conventional. In 2007 it moved into a \$16.5 million building designed by London architect David Adjaye; 50,000 people visited in its first year. The building's five principal galleries have allowed for an active, international exhibition program, featuring such artists as Yang Fudong, Damien Hirst, and Rex Ray.

Alan Becker, vice president of the museum's board and head of its search committee, says Lerner's populist, sometimes irreverent spirit is what the MCA needs to animate its offerings and engage its visitors. "We've got this chassis sitting there and the potential for what we can do is basically unlimited," he says. "By working with Adam, we'll be able to take this to the next level."