

REBOOTING THE MCA

NEW DIRECTOR HAS BIG IDEAS FOR MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

By Kyle MacMillan

As Adam Lerner defines his vision for the future of the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, one overriding point stands out: The status quo is over.

Lerner, 42, who was named director of the 13-year-old changing gallery space last month, plans major changes in nearly every aspect of its operations.

"I got a pretty clear mandate from the board when I was being interviewed," he said last week. "They're ready for a new, all-encompassing vision."

His appointment was accompanied by the surprise announcement that the museum will merge with the Laboratory of Art and Ideas at Belmar in Lakewood, a kind of visual arts think tank that emphasizes audience-friendly lectures, local, grassroots art exhibits and other outreach activities.

Lerner, a former curator of the Contemporary Museum in Baltimore and master teacher at the Denver Art Museum, founded the Lab in 2004 and has served as its executive director since. The space will close at the end of April.

The MCA's board made it clear that it wants to marry the Lab's fun, populist spirit with the institution's well-established international exhibition program that includes showing artists like cutting-edge Brit Damien Hirst.

Lerner's agenda, though, goes much further and includes expanding the types of exhibitions the contemporary museum presents, increasing



ADAM LERNER MEETS HIS NEW STAFF DURING A LUNCHEON AT THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART DENVER. (CRAIG F. WALKER, THE DENVER POST)

cooperation with other museums locally and nationally and expanding its reach in the community.

Cydney Payton, who headed the museum from January 2001 until her departure in October, expanded the institution and spearheaded its much-praised \$16.5 million building, which opened in October 2007. But she was also a polarizing figure who alienated certain facets of the museum's constituency.

While not mentioning his predecessor or her tenure, Lerner made it clear he wants to mend any broken bridges and construct new ones.

“Two things I’m really good at are creating relationships and maintaining them, and big ideas,” Lerner said. “Those are where my strengths lie.”

In particular, he wants to improve the long-strained relationship between the MCA and the Denver Art Museum. He has already slated a meeting with Christoph Heinrich, the Denver Art Museum’s curator of modern and contemporary art, and he hopes to collaborate on projects with him.

The new director also hopes to expand the museum’s national connections. As head of the Lab, he was already an active participant of Contemporary Art Museum Directors, a group with about 30 members, and he wants to build on those ties. According to him, Payton was a member of the group but did not participate in its activities.

In the MCA’s new building, Payton focused on solo-artist exhibitions to the virtual exclusion of thematic or group shows, which can provide a broader, more contextualized look at the art scene. Lerner plans to broaden the mix.

“When the MCA search committee interviewed me,” he said, “they made it very clear to me that they’ve heard so much negative — and constructive — feedback about their exhibition program that they didn’t feel beholden to any existing concepts.”

He will organize some exhibitions himself, but he intends as soon as possible to hire a curator who will focus exclusively on researching and planning such offerings.

Payton served as both the museum’s administrative head and its sole curator, a combination that Lerner said he could not sustain successfully.

“An exhibition takes a long time to plan,” he said. “I want someone who is in studios frequently meeting artists, at the biennials, seeing what is interesting internationally, spending a month writing articles. You can’t do that running an organization.”

Lerner will also be more open to hosting traveling exhibitions, which Payton largely shunned. Some of the available shows are too small for the Denver Art Museum and too large for the Metropolitan State College of Denver’s Center for Visual Art in LoDo.

At the same time, he envisions significantly increasing the number of exhibitions the museum co-organizes with other institutions, such as the Santa Monica Museum of Art, a Los Angeles-area institution with a similar size and contemporary mission.

A challenge will be fitting more expansive exhibitions into the museum’s 27,000- square-foot building. It has five principal gallery spaces, which are separated physically and each geared to a different medium.

“The building has its own personality, and I like that fact about it,” Lerner said. “A really good curator has the ability to work with the personality of a building.”

Local artists

One show the new director knows for sure will be displayed is “The Countercultural Object,” which he was originally co-curating for the Lab. It will shift to the Museum of Contemporary Art and probably go on view in 2011.

Four area artists have had residencies at the museum with accompanying solo exhibitions since the debut of its new building. Lerner wants to continue such shows and integrate local artists into national and international group shows.

“In Denver,” he said, “there is a group of local artists who could be shown in any museum nationally without any apologies being made or anything like that. Those artists, of course, need to be shown.”

“But there’s a tier below that of artists who I think need to be pushed a little bit. And if they had a forum that advanced their work, that would really help the arts community be known nationally.”

Besides exhibitions, Lerner foresees involving area artists in teaching and outreach, making sure that they have meaningful interactions with visiting artists and finding other ways to foster their careers.

Lerner says combining MCA with the Lab will help, not hurt, local art scene

Amid the excitement over the planned merger of the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver and the Lab at Belmar, there are voices of concern that the change will result in the net loss of a venue and a smaller contemporary art presence in the region.

Adam Lerner, the newly named director of the MCA, disagrees. He argues that the resulting organization will contain the core elements of both institutions — the MCA's exhibition platform and the Lab's public outreach — and will emerge as a stronger entity than either on its own.

Lerner said people who liked the Lab's public programs will find offerings with a similar feel at the MCA. At the same time, the museums' five principal galleries will provide more than enough room for exhibitions.

"The city doesn't need more square footage of art space," he said. "It's not the actual physical space it needs. What it needs is really strong, healthy institutions to do really good work. That's why the merger made a lot of sense immediately."

While the MCA and the Lab are operating in the black, Lerner acknowledged that worries about the impact of the ever-deteriorating economy played a major role in the boards' decision to join the two institutions.

"Not knowing what is going to happen in 2009 made everybody involved look really carefully at trying to see how we could make this merger work," he said. "In these days, you need to be really smart."

The MCA's future: five views

Adam Lerner, the new director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, has promised big changes. The Denver Post asked five people with varying connections to the local art scene what they would like to see happen at the institution.

Dean Sobel, Director, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver

"How the MCA will gain increasing international stature will be an important part of Adam's brief. It doesn't have as strong a profile outside of Colorado as it should and will. I'm not even sure that people coming in for the Denver Art Museum always knew there was a contemporary art museum here."

Sarah McKenzie, Boulder painter

"This happens a lot in Denver, where local artists are given their time, but they're never treated as being on the same playing field as the artists who are being brought in from outside. They'll do their show of the local person and then they do their shows of outside people, but I feel like it's rare that you see the local people brought into a group offering that is more national in scope."

D.M. Sanford, Denver banker and art collector

"Whenever I travel for business or pleasure, going to museums, galleries or studios is usually part of that. Whenever I've visited the MCA's website, it hasn't done anything to really make me want to go. My overall view has been that this doesn't seem appealing to me. It doesn't seem accessible."

Ana Maria Hernando, Boulder artist who has an installation on view at the MCA

"I think Adam Lerner is very talented and he has done great things for the Lab, but my hope is he will maintain the integrity of the MCA, and, whatever ideas he wants to bring from the Lab, he will maintain the personalities of the different places. The idea of mixing the two into one — I don't like that much."

Ivar Zeile, Director-owner, Plus Gallery, Denver

"For me, one of the priorities is to figure out how to integrate the local artists in a more significant way than has been established in the last year. In the last seven years, the interaction that my artists, as well as others, had with the MCA was a lot more significant prior to the new building. Some of the specific things I miss are things like the Colorado Biennial."