

MIXED MEDIA: COLORADO MUSEUMS MERGING

By Kyle MacMillan

Two of the region's most prominent contemporary art spaces announced Tuesday that they will merge, marrying the scrappy spirit of the Lab at Belmar with the broader, upscale exhibitions of the MCA.

The Laboratory of Art and Ideas in Lakewood, a kind of visual-arts think tank, is best known for populist programs, such as its Mixed Taste series of paired talks on totally unrelated topics (Mayan astronomy and Stanley Kubrick? Tamales and literary memoirs?).

The Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, which moved into an architecturally acclaimed \$16.5 million building in October, is a more traditional museum with a little edginess of its own. It is exhibiting the work of world-class iconoclast Damien Hirst.

In essence, this merger combines the best of both — the Lab's accessible outreach programs with the MCA's international shows.

"I expect that people will get some of the flavor of the Lab at the MCA, but it will become something new and different, and that's something we will discover together. It will be a be one-plus-one-equals-three situation," said Adam Lerner, 42, who has directed the Lab since it opened in May 2004.

Talk of a merger was spurred by Lerner's recent appointment as the MCA's director, replacing Cydney Payton, who left in October.



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"I think it makes all the sense in the world to bring this energy into the center of the city," Christoph Heinrich, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Denver Art Museum, the city's other major showcase for new art. "What we lose is that space on the periphery, and it was fun to go there, but it will be even more fun to go to the MCA now."

Lerner, who begins his duties March 16, said the MCA's 27,000- square-foot building at 15th and Delgany streets was large enough to handle the exhibition and programming of the combined institutions and it did not make sense to operate two buildings.

The Lab will close at the end of April, and its assistant creative director, Sarah Baie, will move to the MCA to oversee its public programming, which will operate under the Lab's brand.

"What the MCA wanted is somebody who can take the curatorial platform they've established and add a level of accessibility and engagement, and that's exactly what we've been doing at the Lab," Lerner said.

Alan Becker, the MCA's board vice president and head of the search committee, said Lerner was not on the museum's initial list of candidates. But his name kept coming up, and he was ultimately chosen from among five finalists.

"I don't think it ever occurred to us that one of the most qualified people in the country would already be in Denver," Becker said.

Heinrich called Lerner a "spark-emitter," someone with innovative ideas and who knows how to communicate in inspiring, down-to-earth ways.

"I want the MCA to become an exemplar of what a 21st-century museum experience can be," Lerner said. "How can it be both intellectually and culturally relevant and important and also engage the community in new and vital ways?"