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## REPORT: St. Louis

by patricia watts

Sep 2013



Exterior view of the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis  
 Photo: Helen Binet, courtesy of the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis

Saint Louis is back. One of the largest cities in America in 1900, Saint Louis saw its population, and fortunes, plummet during the 20th century. But over the last decade, St. Louis has been steadily reinventing itself as a significant visual arts center. Today, the city's art scene is burgeoning, spurred by a remarkable influx of talented artists, curators, and directors.

One of these talents is Lisa Melandri, the new director of the Contemporary Art Museum, or CAM, who arrived last August. As she explains this resurgence, "We have the growth of a science and technology base that is replacing--and saving us from--a post-industrial blight." By that she means that local corporations, such as Monsanto, Cortex, and Boeing, have created a non-industrial economic base that can partake in the city's rich history of philanthropy in the arts. Melandri, who was deputy director of the Santa Monica Museum of Art in California for over a decade, is thrilled to be presenting international, cutting-edge programming, including a video work by LA artist Jennifer Steinkamp, which will be projected this fall on the exterior of the museum to celebrate the building's 10th anniversary.

CAM, which is a non-collecting institution, or kunsthalle, is one of two poured concrete "art temples" located in the revived Grand Center District. The other art temple, with which CAM shares a courtyard, is the austere Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, which opened in 2001, creating an excitement about the arts that had not been evident for decades. Although St. Louis was known for the arts in the past--with the famous World's Fair of 1904, when fine art became the high-society indulgence--the art scene later declined, along with the city's population, through the last half of the 1900s. Emily Rauh Pulitzer's vision changed all that. The widow of newspaper scion and avid collector Joseph Pulitzer, Jr. created the 20,000 square foot building to house one of the world's finest private art collections, including works by Picasso, Miro, Modigliani and Monet. CAM followed suit in 2003 by opening its new 27,000 square foot space next to the Pulitzer, after bringing Paul Ha from the Yale University Art Gallery as director. Two years later, Sabine Eckmann, a native of Nuremberg, Germany, was appointed director and chief curator of the twice renamed Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, formerly the Washington University Gallery of Art, and before that the St. Louis School and Museum of Fine Arts. Having the distinction of being the first art museum west of the Mississippi, in 2006 the institution unveiled 18,000 square feet of exhibition space in a new building on campus to present one of the finest university collections in the US.

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North Facade of the New East Building at Dusk, St. Louis Art Museum  
 Photo: Alise O'Brien, courtesy of the St. Louis Art Museum

You'd think that these three major institutions--two with substantial modern and contemporary art collections and all three with new venues--would suffice for a city of 300,000 residents, and a metropolitan population of three million. However, the *piece de resistance* is the recent expansion of one of the principal art museums in the United States, the Saint Louis Art Museum, or SLAM, located in Forest Park, and noted for its unparalleled collection of Max Beckmann paintings, which attracts an annual attendance exceeding its own city's population. The subtle and elegant \$130 million East Building, designed by the UK's Sir David Chipperfield, officially opened to the public on June 29 amid much celebration. Its 82,000 square feet presents SLAM's rarely seen, and truly exquisite, modern and contemporary art collections.

SLAM's curators are Tricia Paik, a Los Angeles native formerly with MOMA in New York, and Simon Kelly, a native of the UK and previously curator at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, both hired in the last four years. In "A New View: Contemporary Art," they explore postwar American art, gathering works in a series of galleries each dedicated to a particular genre or theme--Process Art, Abstract Expressionism, Surrealism in New York, The Minimal Aesthetic, Sculpting the Urban and Natural, Opticality and the Object, and Recent Modes of Abstraction. Showstoppers include Anne Truitt's *Morning Choice* (1968) and Teresita Fernandez' *supernova (5)* (1999). Paik also organized "Postwar German Art" from the museum's collection, including works by Joseph Beuys, Sigmar Polke, and Gerhard Richter; neo-expressionists Georg Baselitz and Jorg Immendorff; and photographers Bernd and Hilla Becker, Thomas Struth, and other Dusseldorf School artists. The most eclectic room is the Sculpting the Urban and Natural Gallery, which features a limestone floor installation by Richard Long, a mixed-media wall-sized sculpture by Leonardo Drew, a feather wheel by Roni Horn, a rare painting by Michael Heizer, and a Louise Nevelson titled *New Continent* (1962), first seen at the Whitney in 1967.

Outside the white walls, just a 20-minute drive from downtown, is one of the most intriguing and significant art parks in the nation, Laumeier Sculpture Park. The park, which opened in 1976, spans 105 acres and provides a "living laboratory where artists and audiences explore the relationship between contemporary art and the natural environment." Marilu Knode, previously a curator at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, began her directorial debut at Laumeier in 2009, and is currently beginning construction on an indoor exhibition space to be named the Aronson Fine Arts Center, that is slated to open in 2014/15. Over the years, Mary Miss, Andy Goldsworthy, Robert Stackhouse, Beverly Pepper and Sol LeWitt have been commissioned to create sited works, many which are naturally deteriorating, as they were intended to do. These early experimental earthworks can still be enjoyed among the newer works, like Tony Tasset's *Eye*, installed in 2007. Speaking of eyes, keep yours peeled for the arrival of a Sam Durant sculpture at Laumeier in 2014.

To address the region's art scene, bioartist Patricia Olynyk, who is director of the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts Graduate School of Art at Washington University, or Wash U, under Buzz Spector, dean of the College and Graduate School of Art, co-organized the 2012 event "Inland Symposium: Central Standard Time." Olynyk states, "I think it is going to be incredibly important for a city like St. Louis to define for itself what constitutes its local culture; to move away from this notion that we are waiting to be invited to the table, or waiting for Godot." A native of Canada, Olynyk views St. Louis as offering an exciting opportunity for young artists, who are able to make work in an affordable city with direct access to important museum collections. To that end, she recently renovated a former church, where she plans to rent out sizable studio spaces for less than half of what they would cost in New York or LA.





*Three Clouds in Waiting*

2011

**Charles Gick**

Installation view at The Luminary Center for the Arts

Photo: Brea Photography, courtesy The Luminary Center for the Arts

No less encouraging is the growth in the city's alternative nonprofit activity, centered around Cherokee Street in South St. Louis, starting with Fort Gondo Compound for the Arts in 2002; the most recent arrival is BANK projects, in a retired drive-through bank on Iowa Avenue. The Luminary Center for the Arts, which opened in 2007, is reopening in a new space this fall on Cherokee at Ohio Avenue that will incorporate artist residencies run by Missouri artist Sarrita Hunn, who currently lives in Berlin. Luminary's director, Mississippi native James McAnally, is also co-founder of the online *Temporary Art Review* with Hunn. The newly renovated 16,000 square foot building will make it the largest alternative space in the city. Also, stay tuned for native St. Louisan public art administrator Meridith McKinley's Via Partnership initiative titled "Sculpture City St. Louis 2014," which includes an international conference, "Monument/ Anti-Monument," in April, with electronic artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer as keynote speaker.

Towering over these various institutions is the iconic Gateway Arch, one of the world's most significant monumental modern sculptures. Eero Saarinen's arch, which opened to the public in 1967, stands 630 feet tall and wide; the design was selected in a competition for a work that would be "transcending in spiritual and aesthetic values." The midcentury modern symbol represents this unique place of explorers and frontiersmen known as the "Gateway to the West." The arch and the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial beneath it had their beginnings in the 1930s with federal support under the WPA. Today, as we struggle with redefining what it means to be American, the arch celebrates the pioneering spirit that made this country--a spirit now finding expression in the renaissance of the arts in this Midwestern city.

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