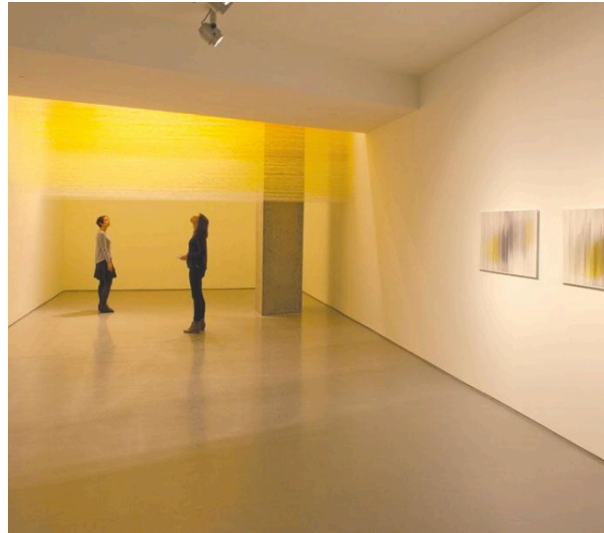


Visual Arts 2014: Big Changes and Best Shows

BY STEVEN ROSEN · DECEMBER 23RD, 2014 · VISUAL ART



Anne Lindberg's "cadence" at the Contemporary Arts Center - Photo: Contemporary Arts Center

Overall, it was an eventful year for the visual arts in Cincinnati —good shows, a stimulating citywide festival devoted to photography, and newsworthy changes at two of our major museums.

That photography festival, FotoFocus Biennial 2014, had enough going on to merit a separate column that will run next week. But for the other subjects, here's a review.

The Cincinnati Art Museum saw Aaron Betsky depart as director and be replaced with Cameron Kitchin, the former director of Memphis, Tenn.'s Brooks Museum of Art. Betsky took heat for commissioning a conceptual piece, Todd Pavlisko's "Crown," for which a sharpshooter fired a rifle in the museum as part of its creation. The finished work, displayed in the spring, didn't justify the controversy. However, a second piece that Pavlisko displayed, "All the Money I Found in a Year," was striking as both an idea and as something to look at. I was glad it was shown.

As other shows and renovations at the museum debuted after Betsky left, it became evident the decisions he made or approved and the curators he supported or hired helped lift the museum to an exceptionally strong year artistically. (One exception was Esther Bell, who left as European art curator less than two years after starting.)

The decorative arts and design curator, Amy Dehan, presented *Cincinnati Silver* and it was a highlight. American art curator Julie Aronson made sure to provide a meaningful educational context for the presentation of Grant Wood's "American Gothic," a loan from the Art Institute of Chicago. That justified the (modest) special-admission price and gave the show some intellectual illumination, a consistent strength of Aronson's exhibits. And the long-awaited arrival of the retrospective of work by Cincinnati-native Pop artist Tom Wesselmann turned out to be revelatory.

Further, new associate photography curator Brian Sholis has turned out to be an energetic activist. He created a permanent gallery to display selections from the collection, used community billboards for an ongoing exhibit displaying work of contemporary photographers, and started a film series. He also curated one of FotoFocus' most ambitious shows, *Eyes on the Street*.

On top of all that, the whole place just looks good: the newly reinstalled antiquities galleries, the folk-art gallery, the redesigned restaurant and the modernized lobby (although the small refreshment bar behind the front desk is too low-key).

It will be interesting to see if Kitchin keeps another Betsky innovation I've always thought looked odd, the so-called "greatest hits" gallery with its individual viewing "booths." Yet while it's important to see art in the context of related work, it's also nice — and right for the times — to isolate single works in contemplative environments.

I look forward, by the way, to the return of the Damascus Room. Its absence is missed.

Meanwhile, the Contemporary Arts Center has been engaged in something very interesting — "softening the edges," in its words, of its soon-to-be-12-year-old Zaha Hadid building. In September, it installed Nam June Paik's toweringly playful Metrobot sculpture close to the building on Walnut Street. And early next year, FRCH Design Worldwide will begin some pronounced changes to the lobby — adding lounge space, a relocated welcome desk and gift shop and a new café.

Considering Hadid's creation was hailed as "the most important building since the end of the Cold War" when it opened, and that the austere lobby was a highpoint of her "urban carpet" concept to move visitors from the street outside through the lobby to the galleries upstairs, this is quite a change. And from an architectural/urban-planning standpoint, it means activity rather than design alone is needed to lure people inside a public building on a busy downtown street. And there's no activity like eating and drinking.

By the way, an ethereal work is on display at CAC through March 22, 2015. Called "cadence," Anne Lindberg's Egyptian cotton thread is spread between two gallery walls so finely it creates an aura, like a 3-D Rothko painting. It is heavenly and the best single piece I've seen this year. It's from her current show, *Unmade*, with Saskia Olde Wolbers.

ArtWorks had a busy year creating murals and other projects, including organizing walking tours of its downtown and Over-the-Rhine murals. Its rendering of Tom Wesselmann's "Still Life #60" on a downtown wall — part of the Cincinnati Masters mural series — is a proud addition to its collection. But another of its new murals turned out to be even more influential: designer Jason Snell's "Cincinnati Strong Man: Henry Holtgrewe."

It's right along Vine Street in Over-the-Rhine and gets the hipster aesthetic of the OTR renaissance perfectly. It's a representational mural that has the design aesthetic of a giant graphic novel. And it celebrates Cincinnati history, not in a stuffy, good-for-you "straight" way, but by discovering an

offbeat pop-cultural/folkloric figure who many people had never heard of before. It's humorously populist. If there's such a thing as an "alt-mural," this is it.

And speaking of graphic novels, the Carnegie's *With and Without: Challenges* multi-artist exhibit provided a showcase for Carol Tyler, creator of the *You'll Never Know* trilogy of books about the effect of her father's World War II experiences. Her art display — an installation, really — would have fit at the Whitney Biennial I saw earlier in the year.

Elsewhere, in its display of artist-illustrated books from its Eda Kuhn Loeb Collection, the Main Library's Cincinnati Room came up with a show easily suitable for the art museum. And it was also great to see the fantastical work of sculptor/semblage artist Rondle West in the Miller Gallery, even if he's no longer represented there.

Finally, I was enthused about the success of the Near*by art collective's *Lightgeist* show at Over-the-Rhine's Rhinegeist brewery in November. The local group's idea of using existing spaces for one-off events is a good one, especially when it can get artists as good as those in Lightgeist to participate.

I am looking forward to this group's 2015 activities, which are in the planning stages. But then, there's a lot else to look forward to. More on that at a later date. ©