

SOPHISTICATED LIVING

{St. Louis' Finest}





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CAM captures the city's love of contemporary art

By Craig Kaminer / Additional photos by Greg Rannells

Before CAM was the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, it was the First Street Forum located on Laclede's Landing, and best known for its cutting-edge programming, influential board and big vision. By 2003, some two decades after it had begun, the board decided that it wanted a permanent, bespoke home, and a name consistent with its mission. Now 20 years after opening the museum next door to the Pulitzer Arts Foundation, CAM works to enrich lives and inspire curiosity, creativity, and learning through experiences with contemporary art. Its mission is to create meaningful engagement with the most relevant and innovative art being made today in a welcoming space of architectural significance. And, it's free to all.

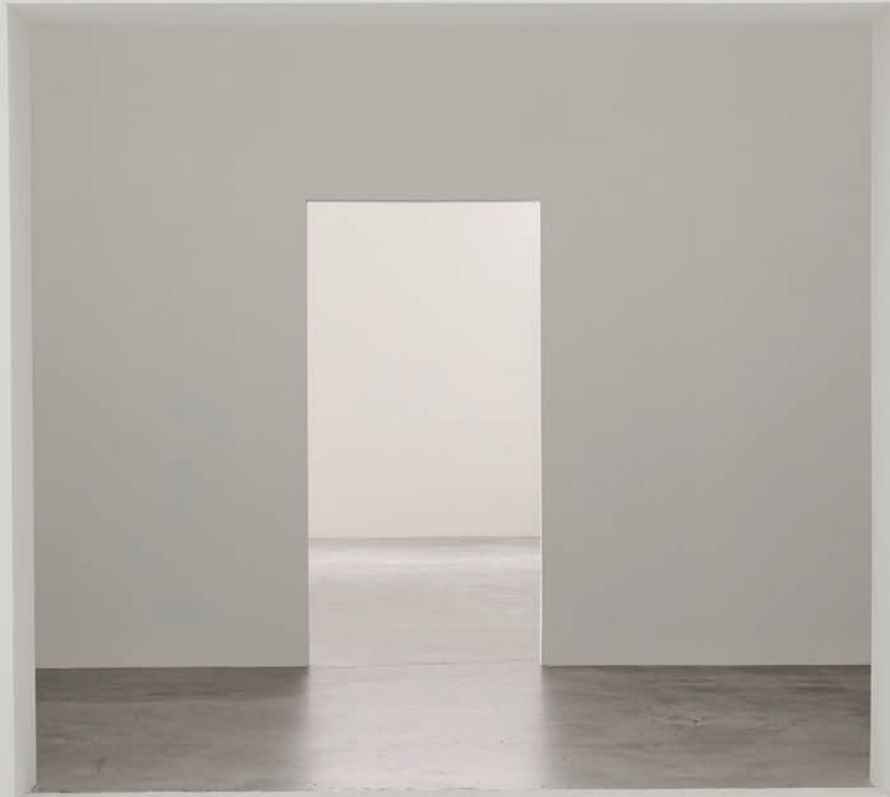
I remember the conversation with Susan Sherman who was the then board chair about the decision to morph The Forum to CAM and take a leap for St. Louis into the highly competitive world of non-collecting contemporary art institutions, select a world-class architect to design the eventual building, and launch the museum on the Western fringe of Grand Center — just as if it were being done in New York or LA. It all seemed like a pipe dream, until it became a reality.

Emily Rauh Pulitzer, the founder and chair of the Pulitzer Arts Foundation, said at the time: "Although everyone had to climb stairs to the third floor to the Forum for Contemporary Art, they came as it showed the work of many important artists

for the first time in St. Louis. Among the most memorable were Kara Walker, Dawoud Bey, and Martin Kippenberger."

At the time Susan and I worked together on many projects, so as the museum became a reality, we were hired to launch CAM to St. Louis. With a newly hired museum director, Paul Ha, an impressive board of directors, and its newly completed architectural masterpiece by American architect, Brad Cloepfil, the opening ceremonies were set with the *Today Show's* Al Roker and Deborah Roberts to emcee the black-tie celebration.

From that first day to today, CAM has thought — and acted — big. Since 2003, more than 683 artists and 260 exhibitions have been attended by 500,000 visitors. Some of the artists have had their first major show at CAM, and have gone on to have illustrious careers not only with museums but also catapulted by the main gallerists of our time. The first show featured Dzine, now Carlos Rolon, and the buzz it created was amazing. Yoshitomo Nara was also featured early in the CAM history before Nara became the pioneering figure in contemporary art whose signature style — which expresses children in a range of emotional complexities from resistance and rebellion to quietude and contemplation — celebrates the introspective freedom of the imagination and the individual. Other big name artists, like Cindy Sherman and Maya Lin, were featured in the early years too.



And the art world took note. For the first anniversary, Glenn Lowry of the Museum of Modern Art was a guest speaker. Others including Jerry Saltz from *New York Magazine*, Thelma Golden from the Studio Museum of Harlem, and Jeff Rosenheim, the Curator in Charge of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, were happy to visit CAM and speak to its leadership and community.

Because CAM is a non-collecting museum, it doesn't have to focus on shepherding its own collection and can show many point-of-views. Over the past two decades, CAM has covered a lot of ground. Not only has the art been breakthrough, but the directors, curators, and staff have gone on to lead some of the most impressive museums in the country including MIT List Visual Arts Center (Paul Ha), RISD Museum (Dominic Molon), and CCA Watis Institute for Contemporary Art (Anthony Huberman).

"The risky, big thinking spirit of The Forum is still very much alive today," says Lisa Melandri, CAM's executive director since 2011. "The programming has changed, but the spirit hasn't. The Forum was less institutional (by its nature), but we have done so many commissions of new work that we often don't know what we're going to get. This experience comes in the form of every medium including performance art, which makes some

viewers uncomfortable, but we continue to push the envelope of what a museum can be."

CAM is the perfect complement to the Pulitzer Arts Foundation, which was designed by Tadeo Ando. While often mistaken for their similar concrete structures, the buildings couldn't be more different. The Pulitzer is intimate while CAM is loud and open. Together they have transformed the western edge of Grand Center and have brought the best of the modern and contemporary art scene to the heart of the arts district. These two seriously important examples of modern architecture have been transformational. According to Melandri, every artist and their gallerist or collector has always ended their visits with a "Wow." People are surprised by the offerings in St. Louis. They're amazed."

Internationally collected art megastar Katherine Bernhardt, who grew up in Clayton and has lived in Brooklyn for much of her career, has been featured in CAM. It was the first time for Bernhardt to do something in St. Louis. During her installation, she went out for lunch and bought a building nearby for what she thought would be a central storage facility for her art. It is now a gallery for contemporary artists (and friends) called Dragon Crab Turtle. Bernhardt is re-seeing our city's art scene with fresh eyes.

Katherine Bernhardt, installation view, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis January 27-April 16, 2017. Photo: David Johnson.



Lisa Melandri. Photo: Jordan Gaunce



Basquiat Before Basquiat: East 12th Street, 1979-1980, installation view, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, September 7 - December 30, 2018. Photo: Dusty Kessler



Left: *Cindy Sherman: Working Girl*, installation view, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, September 16 - December 31, 2005.

Amy Sherald, installation view, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, May 11-August 19, 2018. Photo: Dusty Kessler.



There aren't many cities in the United States with the kind of access to art and artists that we have in St. Louis. Our museums are free and especially at CAM, the artists and curators are available to discuss the art. "We want to be responsive and never make the viewer feel uneducated," Melandri says. "We want to turn people on to art one at a time, if that's what it takes. The silver lining of COVID is that CAM is a place to see work and interact in real time. It's a place people want to go, even if it's just to watch people [look at art]."

So what is the future of art museums? Melandri confidently says, "The next 10 years will not be the dissolution of the

museum. It will be about what the audiences ask of us. How will programming change? More conversations, not just the art, but what is happening in the world. We will always want to be a responsive, nimble, institution but be ready to change."

A good friend and former partner of mine, Eric Thielke, developed a campaign years ago for CAM called New Next Now. It perfectly captured the soul of the museum, why it was created, and what it brings to St. Louis. Melandri says, "While it hasn't run in some time, don't be surprised if we use it again; it's the perfect message at the perfect time." ^{sl}

For more information about the museum, its hours and how to support it, go to <https://camstl.org>