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Past, Present and Future: The New Museum of Wisconsin Art

Curtis L. Carter

Marquette University, curtis.carter@marquette.edu

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THE NEW MUSEUM OF WISCONSIN ART

BY CURTIS L. CARTER

The new Museum of Wisconsin Art (205 Veterans Ave.) in West Bend opened to the public last Saturday. Set alongside the Milwaukee River on a triangle-shaped lot, MOWA is a destination for anyone interested in exploring the range of creative works by Wisconsin artists.

For the inaugural exhibition, Executive Director Laurie Winters has chosen "Anti-fragile," representing 18 glass artists with links to Wisconsin, and Reginald Baylor's "Repetitive Patterns," with creations made especially for the museum. Baylor is a Milwaukee Art's Board 2013 Outstanding Artist of the Year. A selection of works by premier Wisconsin artists from the past, including Carl von Marr's masterpiece, *The Flagellants*, complements the two contemporary exhibitions.

The current MOWA builds upon the legacy of its predecessor established in 1961. Among the aims of this new regional art museum is the goal to connect contemporary and future developments in Wisconsin art with the state's rich cultural heritage. The museum's mission statement calls for celebrating "the value, diversity and uniqueness of the visual arts and artists of Wisconsin."

The facility, designed by Hammel, Green & Abrahamson (HGA), includes 12,000 square feet of gallery space, approximately 7,000 square feet of space for special events, an expansive art storage area, art education studios, a gift shop featuring Wisconsin creations and an outdoor sculpture garden.

Like the University of Alaska art center and the Walker Art Museum (both projects of HGA), the MOWA is executed in a late modernist architectural vocabulary. Clean,

angular lines merge into abstract forms amplified by a generous supply of natural light to offer quietly dramatic spaces inside the museum.

Absent from this building is the dominating ego of the architects, which so often overshadows the art displayed in contemporary museum architecture. Instead, the interior spaces offer a balance between transparency and the materiality of the glass, metals and other construction staples. Transparency and flow in the gallery spaces is intended to motivate viewers to engage freely with the art.

The price for the freedom that abstract architectural forms offer is the absence of any obvious dialogue between this new building and the museum's past when it was housed in a more conventional, but charming, structure. Instead, connections between contemporary art and artistic heritage must rely on the progression of the art itself as it unfolds in the viewers' experiences.

On first glance, this new, modern structure might appear to be a stranger to its setting, marked by a flowing Milwaukee river and the back side of a row of retail buildings. Connecting the beauty embedded in the museum's abstract architectural forms and the beauty of its riverside setting is a project for West Bend to ponder through the possibility of a renovated cityscape with the new museum as its centerpiece.

In any event, West Bend has chosen to advance the future of Wisconsin and regional art while providing a contemporary environment for examining the past and the present. And this is a choice that will enhance the cultural life of the region while challenging its artists to even greater excellence.