Art Museums Giving It the Old College Try

Michael Evan Davidson/MSU

The Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, being built at Michigan State University, opens this fall.

By KEITH SCHNEIDER
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EAST LANSING, Mich.

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Alison Doernberg, a graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, with Milton Avery's “Landscape,” at the Ackland Art Museum.

WHEN it opens this fall, the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University will be the latest in a series of new university art museums that have opened around the country.

But here and at other campuses, striking buildings are just a part of the new profile of university art museums. With the help of departments as varied as nursing, law, meteorology and engineering, the museums’ directors are deploying their extensive collections, and sometimes the artists

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themselves, to enhance curriculums.

In one project under development at the Broad, Amy Franceschini, an artist and urban garden advocate from San Francisco, would serve as an artist-in-residence working with students and faculty in the university's sustainable agriculture program to develop a local foods program in Detroit. Ms. Franceschini attracted attention by using visual design references and received financing for San Francisco community gardens. She also designed a pogo stick that also served as a shovel and a bicycle that converted into a wheelbarrow.

In another planned project, Tim Hyde, a photographer and video artist from New York, would work with Michigan State's forestry and natural resources students and faculty, drawing on his 10 years of photographing the deadfall and shadowed canopy of an 80-year-old red pine plantation in western Michigan.

"The students in M.S.U.'s programs in sustainable forests would have the opportunity to see their world through the eyes of an artist who brings a sensitivity and new vision to something they study every day," Michael Rush, the Broad Museum's director, said in describing his interest in Mr. Hyde's work. "He would open their eyes to an entirely new perception of what a forest is and can be."

University art museums, of course, have been a mainstay of American campuses since 1832, when the Yale University Art Gallery was established, the first university museum devoted exclusively to art, according to a paper by Kimerly Rorschach, the director of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke.

Harvard, Oberlin, the University of Oregon, the University of Michigan, the University of North Carolina and dozens of other colleges and universities have built art museums, too, according to Ms. Rorschach, and more are being built. For example, DePaul University opened its Art Museum in Chicago in September 2011. The Art Museum of West Virginia University is scheduled to open next year.

All have attracted extensive collections and operated under the general mandate, Ms. Rorschach writes, "to give students an opportunity to develop into more cultivated, well-rounded and well-educated adults through contact with original works of art."

In the 21st century, university art museums have become more aggressive in extending their missions and collections to reach deeper into classrooms and curriculums not ordinarily associated with art. At Duke's seven-year-old Nasher Museum, two members of its 30-person staff are devoted exclusively to finding uses for pieces from the collection to enhance course work in various academic departments. Medical students, for instance, spend a day studying visual art in an exercise intended to hone observation and description skills that Nasher staff member developed with professors.

A Duke professor of geology uses the museum's collection of art carved from stone for lessons on the influence of time, oceans and weather.

In both instances, Nasher's academic coordinators helped their colleagues in medicine and geology use art to interest students heavily influenced by the visual immediacy of the Internet, and to be aware that their careers were likely to include colleagues and alliances outside the United States.

"Students need to learn things and to be innovative and entrepreneurial in this new global world," said Ms. Rorschach. "Art is about communicating effectively, about communicating visually, about understanding."

At the University of North Carolina, Mimi V. Chapman, an associate professor of social work, worked with the academic coordinators at the university's Ackland Art Museum to train graduate students to more carefully evaluate how their impressions were formed in

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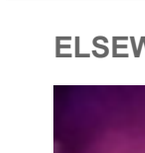

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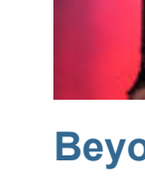

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working with clients. “Art is a way that helps uncover how students see things through a personal lens, and become aware of biases they may not be aware they have,” she said.

This semester, Professor Chapman and eight graduate students spent a day in January and another in February studying an assortment of 20th century portraits and landscapes, among them Milton Avery’s “Landscape,” painted in 1948. The dominant images in Avery’s impressionistic scene are a blue hammock swinging from two dark tree trunks along a pathway flanked by blue and gold trees. Professor Chapman assigned students to describe what they saw in the picture — its images, colors, and emotions — and where they would hang it in their own homes.

Alison Doernberg, a 34-year-old student, was surprised by the range of responses to Avery’s painting. “Even though it was a simple image, people had very different perceptions,” said Ms. Doernberg. “Some of us felt the trees were dark and foreboding. Other people saw them as solid and providing shade. Their view was more positive. It seemed to me, at first glance, to be an image that wasn’t particularly provocative. But it turned out to be a lot to discuss.

“The lesson is that it’s not just what I am seeing in a piece of art or a client,” she said. “It’s also thinking about why I am perceiving things the way I do. Are they coming from things in front of me or from other sources in my life? It feels very transferable to me.”

In October, the University of Wisconsin opened a $47.2 million, 81,000-square-foot addition to the Chazen Museum of Art in Madison. The museum’s academic outreach program includes a project with Steven A. Ackerman, a professor of atmospheric and oceanic sciences, who teaches an introductory course on weather.

Among the Chazen’s collection of landscapes, Professor Ackerman chose to focus on “Our Good Earth,” painted by the American regionalist John Steuart Curry in 1942. Visiting the museum last fall with a group of students studying atmospheric optics and cloud formations, he drew their attention not to the central features of Curry’s painting — a young, muscular overall-clad farmer standing watch as two children play in maturing wheat — but to the range of blues in Curry’s sky and the shape and shading in Curry’s puffy clouds.

“We are particularly interested in how the artist represents clouds,” he said. “Today’s scientists deal with tons and tons of data. How do we represent the huge volume of data we receive? How do we visualize that data? How artists visualize the world is very valuable to us.”

In East Lansing, Lou Anna K. Simon, the president of Michigan State, said novel academic programs would be part of the university’s plan to establish the Broad as a “museum without walls.”

“It is a focal point of this campus,” said Ms. Simon. “Students from any department, any part of this campus, will find some place for themselves at the museum.”

Alison Gass, a new curator at the Broad, was busy recently scouting empty spaces on and off Michigan State’s campus to house an art and garden project. Ms. Gass came to Michigan from San Francisco, where she worked at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, became aware of Ms. Franceschini’s work and included several pieces of Ms. Franceschini’s art in an exhibition at the museum.

“I called Amy when I got here and I told her this place was fantastic,” said Ms. Gass. “There is land here. They study food systems and forests and have experimental farms. There is real potential to be a leader in land art.”

Ms. Franceschini said she was interested in the Michigan State opportunity. “Local food and gardens are critical agents of change,” she said. “The process of making that happen is

as much part of the creative process as traditional art. The idea of applying art to knowledge production and the knowledge economy there is very attractive."

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