



## Susquehanna Art Museum

BY TONY CONTE, PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRITT MACAULAY

If you've ever been unfortunate enough to have lost a sublet prematurely, or worse, if you've ever suffered eviction, then you know how the unsettling undertone of imminent instability fast colors every future housing situation. Now imagine being tasked with preparing consistently fresh art exhibitions in rented or otherwise contracted space, and it's easy to understand the challenges of creating a space of artistic transcendence in a place someone else calls home.

For much of the Susquehanna Art Museum's (SAM) existence, it lived like an orphan, untethered to a space of its own. Nearly 20 years after its inception, the museum has completed a bold refurbishing and reconstruction of the place it now calls a permanent home in Harrisburg's Midtown district.

As a venture built on the basis of creativity and artistic endeavor, it should come as little surprise that the venue itself inspires in a way that very few modern ones can. Anchored by the repurposed Keystone Bank Building, the museum has achieved the tricky task of honoring the integrity of the historic, whilst making the transition to its modern exhibition space, an additional 20,000 square feet, feel effortless. There is an undeniable flow from antiquity to modernity that could not have been achieved without bold leadership and a visionary at the helm.

Laurene Buckley is the museum's former executive director. Her passion for the museum and its outreach efforts colors every story she recounts of the challenges met

and overcome in transforming this stubborn space and coaxing artistic utility from it.

Hired following an extensive national search for SAM's executive director, she leapt at the opportunity to lead the daunting task of construction, relocation and re-imagination simply because, in her words, she'd never built a museum from scratch before.

The 4,000-square-foot gallery already buzzes with vibrancy. Embracing its lack of a permanent collection, the museum regularly explores fresh artistic terrain with the installation of new exhibits on a quarterly basis. An exhibit fills the cavernous majesty of the bank lobby, an echoing space that somehow conveys an intangible warmth.

At the back of the lobby, the bank's vault door hangs agape boasting a sheen of metal gears and glass that look like the exploded and disproportionate innards of a fine timepiece. Through the maw of the vault itself sits rows of small plastic chairs prepared for children's story time. The walls of the vault are festooned with artwork from children's books, which echo an exhibit fully and enthusiastically explored in the main gallery.

The education center hosts the museum's fourth exhibition space. Four exhibitions updated four times a year. One annual membership - \$30 for an individual - grants you unfettered access to this perennial display of artistic reinvention, and a membership for the whole family costs only \$20 more.

Don't for a second think that every art exhibit remains confined to a traditional gallery. The VanGo! traveling exhibit carries

its unique art experience to the masses, traveling up to two and a half hours from the museum to bring the art to you.

As if all of this weren't sufficient to earn the museum its recent public accolades, the Susquehanna Art Museum also hosts a rich variety of educational programming. Ever wanted to learn about art history? Come to a SAM hosted lecture. Considering learning the basics of creating your own anime? They've got a class for that. Ever wanted to hone your book-binding skills? You guessed it: SAM's got it.

Given the breadth of the already ongoing happenings, it's difficult to imagine that the museum would even consider taking on yet another endeavor. Yet much, much more is in the works.

There is talk of an eventual series of film screenings and educational summer camps encouraging artistic achievement for teens. A large swathe of land adjacent to the main building sits laden with soil awaiting a planned sculpture garden. The wall of the building towering over the future garden will soon be awash in color with a mural completed by a local man who was awarded the task based on his success in a juried mural competition.

If any of this has piqued your interest, you will want to visit the museum yourself to find out about everything else on tap there. Surely, the energy and enthusiasm behind SAM's momentum will only serve to underscore the bold steps successfully taken to breathe new life into the arts and the region. ☉

(l) The VanGo! traveling exhibit; (r) Laurene Buckley, SAM's former executive director

