

20/20

SITE Santa Fe's new building is a clear vision for the future

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By Liz Brindley

"In dealing with the future, at least for the purpose at hand, it is more important to be imaginative and insightful than to be one hundred percent 'right.'"

—Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* introduction

Since it opened in 1995, SITE Santa Fe, an exhibition space for international contemporary art, has pushed the boundaries of what it means to be a museum. In 22 years, SITE has presented more than 100 exhibitions including 10 biennials, featuring over 700 works by international artists. As of this week, it continues to break ground in redefining the museum experience with the opening of its new building. "A museum itself is a found object that you can play with," Joanne Lefrak, director of education and outreach, says. "You can preserve it or you can change it."

SITE collaborated with SHoP, a New York City-based architecture firm comprised of over 180 architects, designers and engineers who question traditional patterns and conventional spaces, to create a state-of-the-art building that breaks down the walls of the classic "white-box" museum to offer an open and accessible environment. "On the whole, our previous building's facade was a barrier because you couldn't see what was going on inside," Chief Curator Irene Hofmann explains. "So, one of the things that was paramount in working with SHoP was to make what we do visible to the community."

The prow that now extends from the building points to the public as an invitation to come explore, which is easier to do thanks to the glass entrance facing Paseo de Peralta, and gives passersby a clear peek into the space. "I hope curiosity and wonder will draw people in," Anne Wrinkle, director of external affairs, says, "especially people who have never been here before to open the dialogue that contemporary art is not as intimidating as one might think."



Linear Sequence (A-Z West), 2016

powder-coated steel and aluminum, tung oiled Birdseye Maple Plywood, brass, 3 cushions; Approximate Overall Dimensions: 32.5 x 168 x 72 inches (82.6 x 426.7 x 182.9 cm); 2.7 X 14 X 6 feet

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Photo: Andrea Zittel

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Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

The potential intimidation factor Wrinkle refers to dissipates immediately upon entering the lobby. Visitors can now sip on caffeine at the new coffee and snack bar, peruse an expanded gift shop, lounge on cushy chairs and observe art installations in SITELab, an experimental gallery, all before even buying a ticket to enter the main exhibition space (which is still free 10 am-7 pm on Fridays and 10 am-1 pm Saturdays).

When visitors do make it past the lobby, however, they discover an auditorium with sound quality so crisp it is easy to forget white noise exists. This is where SITE now offers public programs including previously established series like *My Life in Art*, lectures that focus on significant people who have spent their lives immersed in art, and *Innovative Thinker*, an annual lecture series that highlights the work of visionary contemporary arts educators.

SITE also unveils further free samplings of new programs during its opening weekend, many of which are interactive experiences. "Projects work better as a collaboration between the institution, artist and community," Lefrak explains, "and our programming in this new facility moves into the realm of co-creation."

Some of the fresh offerings include *Sound and Spectacle*, a series of performance art and experimental music; *The AV Club: +Films at SITE*, screenings of artist-produced and -directed films; and *Tea and Tour*, a collaboration with the Teahouse on Canyon Road during which visitors join a 30-minute tour followed by a discussion with tea that has been specifically paired with the art. And these programs only scratch the surface of what is to come.

Across the hall from the auditorium is the Learning Lab, a resource center and student workspace; just outside is the Sky Mezzanine, a central two-story courtyard dotted with installation art, sculptures and trees. Lastly, there is the revamped gallery space where visitors can get a glimpse into the future through SITE's first exhibition in the renovated building, *Future Shock*. "I hope this show signals the future of the institution and the possibilities here," Hofmann tells SFR. "I hope it shifts the conversation to really view SITE as open and accessible."

Future Shock features the work of 10 international artists to investigate the impact of change in our contemporary lives. According to Hofmann, *Future Shock* is inspired by Alvin Toffler's book of the same name, in which advancement is seen as a menacing force. However, this exhibition aims to illuminate both the positive and negative aspects of evolution through a variety of media such as immersive video, large-scale painting, sculpture and installation by artists including Doug Aitken, Andreas Gursky, Patrick Bernatchez and Tom Sachs.

Ten artists is a significant reduction from SITE's typical capacity, which has welcomed over 30 artists in a single biennial in the past. Hofmann divulges that the purpose of honing in is to make space for each artist to have a significant installation. This becomes clear in the galleries where each work has room to breathe, communicate its message and make connections with visitors, an experience Lefrak describes with one word: magic. "I keep using that word," she says. "When art is good, it stirs something in you that you just can't get anywhere else."

A few of the larger works such as Andreas Gursky's photograph "Kuwait Stock Exchange I" and Alexis Rockman's oil painting "Battle Royale" are examples of pieces that could not previously be installed in SITE's galleries due to lack of environmental control. Now, SITE has a humidity, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) system that blows open the doors for the museum to borrow and exhibit works of similar media and scale.

The selections are not limited to the formal galleries, either, but they practically spill out of every nook and cranny of the building in a sleek and attractive way to increase visibility and access. Regina Silveira's "Mundus Admirabilis" features large vinyl bugs that are stuck to the entrance windows, the lobby floor and a wall of the courtyard. Additionally, three billboards face the railroad tracks with images from Andrea Zittel's "How to Live" series that ask passersby questions like, "To acquire possessions, or to live free of encumbrances?"

"I think a lot of these works have very accessible entry points," Hofmann points out. "My hope is that with a building that feels more welcoming, people start to see SITE as a place to gather—as



Andreas Gursky's large-scale photograph, "Kuwait Stock Exchange I," is one work SITE welcomes into Future Shock thanks to a new HVAC system.

Courtesy SITE Santa Fe

a place that's for them."

SITE's new building is imaginative and insightful, moving beyond the attempt to be 'right' and into the realm of experimentation where mistakes and successes are both equally valuable to determine the next steps as a society. In this way, the overhauled space and upcoming exhibitions are not only visions for the future of the venerable 22-year-old institution, but a valuable model for the future of museums as a whole and how they might become spaces that shape and inspire our collective humanitarian progre