

New exhibits and performing arts series broadens The Ringling's reach

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“Not everyone wants to see European paintings or the house (Ca’ d’Zan) or the contemporary visual arts —some respond to things more in a performative way so (now) we’re able to reach out to that audience as well and provide artistic experiences for everyone in the community.”

ONE CURTAIN CLOSSES, ANOTHER OPENS

For nine years, the museum hosted The Ringling International Arts Festival. The four-day event brought some of the best performers in the fields of music, dance, acrobatics and theater to Sarasota from all over the world.

But now, The Ringling team is shaking things up. Last year was the final RIAF, and in its place is a new year-long contemporary performance series called New Stages.

High says there were several elements that led to the decision to discontinue the festival, but one was the seasonal nature of Sarasota. Many Ringling patrons are snowbirds who weren't back in time for the festival in October, so the event was reaching a narrow audience.

"We decided, rather than doing five or six performing groups in a three-day period of time, we can take the same number of groups and spread them out over a season," High says. "So rather than doing an intense three days, we're doing an entire nine months."

The Ringling first tested out this idea in 2017 when it kicked off the New Stages series with "SEESAW" by Wise Fool New Mexico. Two other outdoor contemporary performances followed, all of which were curated by Project Coordinator Sonja Shea as part of her thesis while working toward advanced certification in performance-art curation at Wesleyan University.



"Geneviève-Françoise-Laurette Randon da Malboissière as Melpomene" by Louis-Michel van Loo, The Horvitz Collection – Courtesy image

The results were promising, enough to bring back the series in spring 2018. This year marks the first full season of New Stages, and it all started Oct. 19 with Grammy-winning percussionist Matthew Duvall's "Inlets."

High says making New Stages a season-long series allows artists the opportunity to stay longer and meet more locals. Many performers will lead lectures, workshops and other conversation-driven events to educate Sarasotans about their art form, creating an opportunity that was previously rare at the museum.

“This season is really about moving into a yearlong format that allows artists to come in and better connect with our community,” says Shea.

GROW LOCAL, THINK GLOBAL

The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art is the state art museum of Florida. It established itself as the go-to place for the visual arts in Sarasota decades ago.

So why should anyone go there for the performing arts when there are several professional theater, dance and music companies in town?

“What we provide the community is different than other arts organizations here,” High says. “It adds to the mix of what’s available in the performing arts arena.”



Raphael Xavier’s ‘Point of Interest’ runs Nov. 30 to Dec. 1. Courtesy photo

Part of that uniqueness comes from the number of groups outside Florida and even outside North America the museum is attracting. While other groups think more locally, The Ringling tries to bring the world to Sarasota.

“As an institution it’s about thinking globally and locally and bringing materials from away to open people’s eyes to what’s out there, but at the same time celebrating artists who are local in much the same way,” High says. “(We) open eyes to what’s around us. That’s an overarching theme curatorially, and, of course, the performance program is a big aspect of that.”

Guests were encouraged to play any of the instruments scattered about Mable's Rose Garden Oct. 20 at The Ringling during New Stages artist Matthew Duvall's "Transient Landscapes ... of the Passing Days." Photo by Niki Kottmann

The next New Stages performance is professional dancer Raphael Xavier's "Point of Interest," a show that uses a multigenerational cast to combine breakdancing with spoken word poetry and soundscape of musical rhythms. The result is a dynamic piece aiming to show that hip-hop has no age limit, Shea says.

Another aspect of the performance series that sets the museum apart is its price range. Tickets for events hosted by many other arts organizations will burn a hole in your pocket, but all the New Stages shows start at \$20.

This was an intentional choice, High says. He hopes lower ticket prices will make performances more accessible for potential audiences of all ages, genders, ethnicities and economic backgrounds.

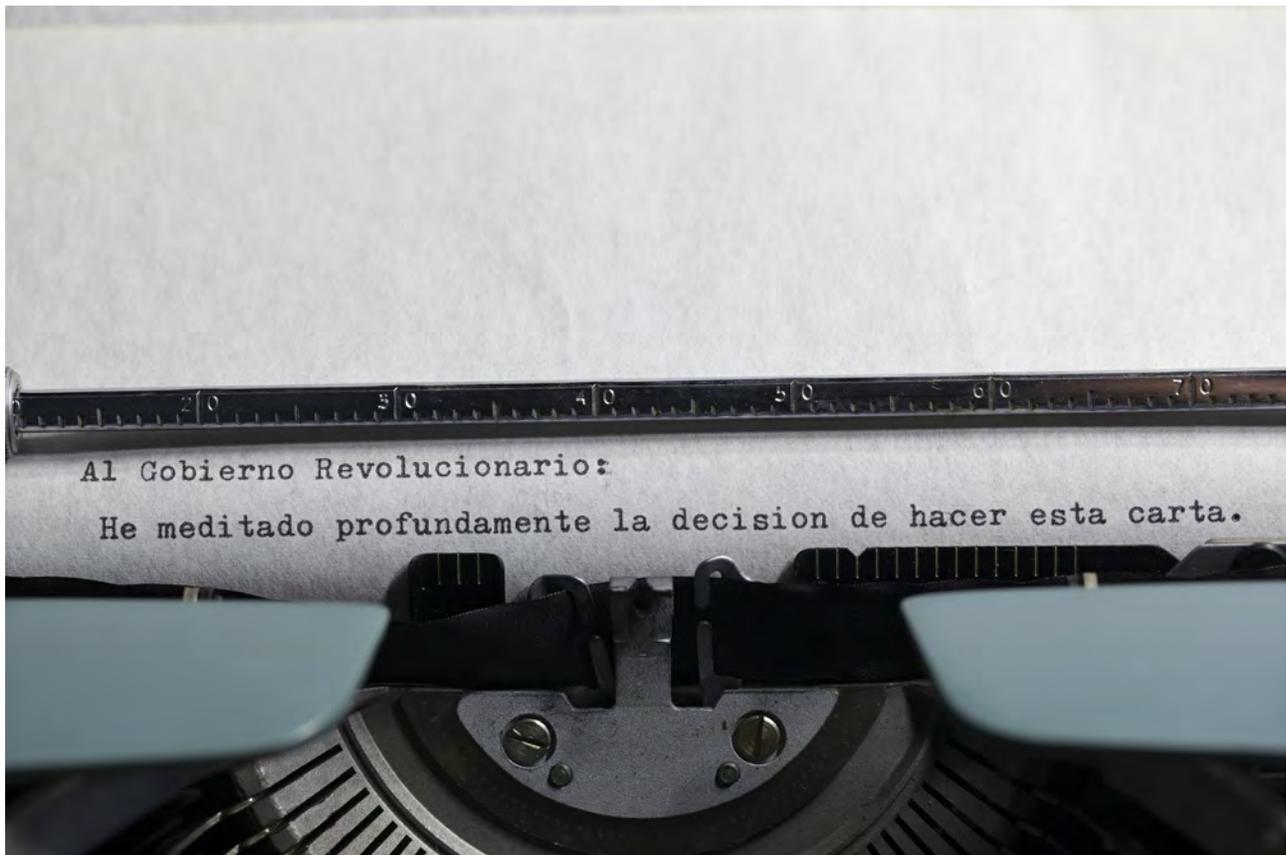
"We aren't making a profit on this stuff," he says. "We want a mix of our community here to experience our programs."

REMEMBERING THE ROOTS

Don't fret, visual arts lovers. As The Ringling expands its performing arts programming, it will continue to offer a wide variety of static artwork on which visitors can feast their eyes.

In the realm of contemporary art, guests can now experience Coco Fusco: "Twilight" through Feb. 17 in the Museum of Art's Monda Gallery. Fusco is a Cuban-American writer and interdisciplinary artist largely known for her political commentary art. This solo exhibit is all about the government of her native Cuba (with one nod to the head of the White House).

"Twilight" is a collection of three video projects and one sculpture, including the world premiere of two works Fusco created at the Hermitage Artist Retreat in Englewood on commission after winning the Greenfield Prize in 2016.



Coco Fusco's "La confesión" is one of the video works by the artist now available to view at The Ringling's Monda Gallery for Contemporary Art. Courtesy image

Her new video essay, "Vivir en junio con la lengua afuera/To live in June with Your Tongue Hanging Out," was created to show the harsh reality faced by artists, writers, performers and others in Cuba under Decree 349, which was issued this past summer to limit the rights of creative people.

Curator Chris Jones says the law cracks down on the licensing of artists in Cuba, making it harder for people to sell their art, perform, etc. It thus legalizes and legitimizes a long tradition of oppressing the arts in Cuba.

Fusco's new sculpture on the grounds adjacent to the museum is "Tin Man of the Twenty-First Century," which she created in collaboration with Chico MacMurtrie (also as part of her commission after winning the Greenfield Prize) as a satirical look at the American commander in chief. This aluminum, steel, resin and wig structure is meant to mock the tradition of governments erecting statues of their leaders in their best form — idealized bodies that don't reflect reality, yet are meant for veneration.

"I see it as a 3D political cartoon," Jones says. "Satirical artists can voice their opinion here (in the U.S.) — we take that for granted."



Coco Fusco is an artist/writer and the Andrew Banks Endowed Professor of Art at the University of Florida. Courtesy image

Together, the works share the importance (and power) of discord and free expression when living in a democratic society.

“Coco is focused on the role of dissident artists and intellectuals in the public discourse,” Jones says. “She explores how we represent one another, especially in the Americas.”

The focus of “Twilight,” he says, is to explore the stage of change and uncertainty that Cuba is in after the end of the Castro regime.

When visitors walk into the exhibit, they’ll find black walls and several black benches facing one enormous screen. The nearly two hours’ worth of footage runs on a loop with English subtitles. The theater atmosphere was a way to ensure there was no cross-pollination of sound, Jones says.

Asked why it’s important for the museum to host contemporary exhibits like this, he says it’s all about getting people talking.

“We want to connect with artists making a difference in the cultural milieu,” Jones says. “And we encourage everyone to share their opinions with us.”

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

Over in the Searing Wing, Ringling patrons who are a little more old school can enjoy an exhibit that has nothing to do with contemporary art – at least not by most definitions.



“Pan and Syrinx” by Jean-Baptiste-Marie Pierre is one of the 80 works on display as part of “Storytelling: French Art from The Horvitz Collection.” Courtesy image

“Storytelling: French Art from The Horvitz Collection” is actually two exhibits – “Imaging Text: French Drawings for Book Illustration from The Horvitz Collection” and “Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century French Paintings from The Horvitz Collection.”

The collection is owned by Jeffrey E. Horvitz and, after 30 years of collecting, features more than 1,600 French drawings, paintings and sculptures.

This traveling double exhibit at The Ringling until Dec. 2 features 60 drawings and 10 prints for book illustration created between the 16th and 19th centuries, as well as 10 paintings in a variety of styles.

Sarah Cartwright, Ulla R. Searing curator of collections at The Ringling, is overseeing the works during the stay at the museum.

“It’s an excellent complement to the Ringling Collection,” she says, comparing the exhibit to John Ringling’s collection of artwork by the Old Masters. “We don’t have much French art, but this supplements what we have.”

Cartwright is excited to offer patrons the opportunity to see art in one of its purest, most raw forms: drawing. It's not everyday that art lovers can see several sketches of a work before it comes to life, and even less often that the art of book illustrations is celebrated in this fashion.



Analise Gallant plays one of the instruments with her mom, Rochelle Gallant, during the interactive portion of Matthew Duvall's "Transient Landscapes ... of the Passing Days" in Mable's Rose Garden. Photo by Niki Kottmann

With subjects ranging from mythological and religious scenes to more playful imagery, both these exhibits explore the importance of narrative storytelling through images.

WHAT GOES AROUND...

So.

Are the visual art staying put?

"What's old is new again on the other end," High says. "Performance and visual arts have been linked for a few hundred years."

That's not changing for now – or at least not at The Ringling.