Hidden in plain sight: university art museum in flux

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Just shy of its ten-year anniversary, the Paul and Lulu Hilliard University Art Museum is in flux: the art museum is in need of a new art director, and its broken water wall no longer provides museum-goers with the soothing sounds of gushing water.

"At ten years old, everything starts falling apart," said Cindy Hamilton, store manager and volunteer coordinator. The museum's gift shop is filled with educational books and hands-on toys for children as well as coffee table books from Roy Lichtenstein to Vincent van Gogh for adults.

She said she wanted an art director who "would take the museum to the next level."

"We need new energy here," Hamilton stated, her voice echoing up the way a voice only does in a half-empty museum. "Our shows need to really grab the students."

Hamilton shares this lament with her fellow staff members: that the sprawling glass building located just beyond the edge of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette at 710 E. St. Mary Blvd. is largely ignored by students and fellow Lafayette denizens, despite the eminent artists associated within walking distance to campus, such as sculptor and printmaker John Buck, world-famous cubist painter Pablo Picasso and local legend and photographer Philip Gould.

The museum is named for Paul and Lulu Hilliard, who donated $3 million for the construction of the art museum in 1995. Paul Hilliard, an oil businessman, also donated to the National WW II Museum in New Orleans and served on its board. His wife Lulu Hilliard died in 2005.

The 33,000-square-foot building is a work of modern art itself, standing as an anachronism among ancient oak trees and traditional, red brick offices. The stainless steel, stone and glass ode to simplistic design was designed by New Orleans-based architects Eskew+Dumez+Ripple.

Its reflective exterior is meaningfully modern: the university's erstwhile plantation-inspired art museum, now called the A. Hays Town building after the famous architect who created it, can use the Hilliard as a mirror "to reflect the old within the new," according to interim director Lance Harris.

"One of the goals that I had when I first came aboard was for the museum to have a greater connectivity to the university and the university students, and I think we've done a good job of that," stated Harris, who began his tenure in February 2013. "Particularly in partnering with the college of the arts."

"This belongs to the students, and I wish more students would use it," Hamilton lamented with a sigh. "But I'm glad to see that more professors are putting us in their curriculum."

John Hathorn, Ph.D., is a visual arts professor who uses the museum in his lessons, as well as for his students' senior theses, which all visual arts students must complete prior to earning their bachelor's.

"This is a culmination of that exhibition, that year-long study," said Hathorn during the 2014 Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Exhibition's opening reception. "There are about 35 artists featured here."

In order to have work on display in the Hilliard, graduating visual arts seniors have a faculty committee who mentors their work during the course of two semesters in preparation of what is, for most, their first exhibition. "They worked really hard, lots of ups and downs," said Hathorn. "In most cases, they have to edit their work to fit in the museum. It's thrilling for them and for us to get to see their work. The museum is an amazing facility, and we are incredibly fortunate to have that here."

Hathorn, who also teaches freshman painting courses, said he uses the museum for lessons and brings in students every time there is a new exhibition, which updates with every major semester on UL Lafayette's academic calendar: fall, spring and summer. Still, Hathorn addressed the students' — and faculty's — ambivalence toward the landmark. "I think it's always a challenge to get the university faculty at large interested and engaged. It's an ongoing effort to continue to raise that awareness. It is difficult; there's a lot of competition for entertainment, events and educational opportunities. We just have to continue to raise that awareness."

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In addition to working with visual arts professors to get potential patrons to visit the museum, Hamilton noted how English and history instructors are bringing their students in more. The museum has also been collaborating with the education department so future teachers can devise lesson plans for field trips. This has brought in education-based exhibitions, like the Art of Seating, which displays chairs from the 18th to 21st century.

“That’s a good way to start ‘em young, and get them to go to museums,” Hamilton said wryly.

Security guard Hugo Boutte recalled one exhibition filled with carved silver pistols, some owned by ex-presidents like Ronald Reagan.

“It brought in people who had never been to a museum before -- I’m talkin’, in their 50s, 60s -- and most people here, they have guns, but these were pieces of art,” said Hamilton.

The museum has shown more artwork related to history, and even owns The Ambassador Jefferson Caffery Collection. Caffery’s pieces are all taken from the time he served as ambassador to Egypt from 1949-1955 and features authentic clay pottery and other archaic artifacts.

“We try to keep a balance between photography, paintings, 3-D objects in all its forms,” stated Harris.

To keep the museum fresh, Harris, a Laurel, Miss. native who graduated from the University of Southern Mississippi in history and anthropology, said the museum is often used for cultural events pertaining to Acadiana businesses and fundraisers, like the Acadiana Wine and Food Festival, fashion fundraisers and the SMART (Science meets art) festival, which is put on by the UL Lafayette physics department.

“In January, Festival International (de Louisiane) used the grounds for the pins and poster premiere party, which is the first time they have ever done that event outside of downtown,” he said. “I hope to do more things with them in the future.”

“It’s kind of my job to see how the ship is running,” Harris said quietly. Although his time at the museum is temporary, Harris remains enthusiastic.

“We’re in talks to do things with the AcA (Acadiana center for the Arts), particularly geared toward education,” Harris said. “We’re going to be working with Festivals Acadiens et Créoles to do an exhibit in the A. Hays Town building.”

In the past, the Hilliard has also partnered with the Episcopal School of Acadiana and the Lafayette Parish School System on a grant to bring in students from “a variety of different schools” throughout the parish, according to Harris. Harris also claimed the museum has working partnerships with the Friends of the Humanities and Lafayette Convention and Visitor’s Commission.

Still, he is unsatisfied with the relatively low turnout the museum receives, as are the staff members and even some members of faculty.

“Our mission is complex in that it gears us toward a mindframe where we are engaged with not one particular group, but we are engaged with a variety of constituents throughout Acadiana,” stated Harris. “I think, primarily, being a university art museum, we need to cater to the needs of the university. I think we need to do a better job of that. I would like to see it draw more students from the campus here to the museum, get them in, experience some respite from their studies.”

Although the Hilliard is certainly the UL Lafayette art museum, Harris stressed that its beauty is not just for students to enjoy.

“I would like to see it attract more visitors and bring more people on campus,” Harris mused. I would like to see it bring more people in the community, the region and the state to campus so they can have a fantastic aesthetic experience here, but also get to see the beauty of campus, even though we’re not on campus proper.”