

Changing Visions: A History

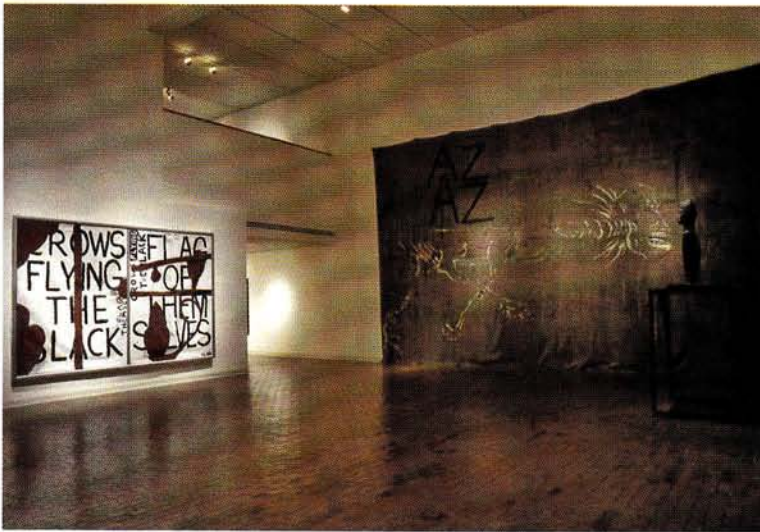
by Claudia Schmuckli

Blaffer Gallery, the Art Museum of the University of Houston, celebrates artistic imagination, stimulates creativity, and inspires independent thinking through a lively dialogue about art and artists. The gallery looks back on more than 30 years of history, during which the institution and its mission have been shaped by the changing vision of its leaders.

Blaffer Gallery was named in honor of the late Sarah Campbell Blaffer, a noted Houston art patron and collector. On the occasion of the building of a new \$5.3 million Fine Arts Center at the University of Houston, Blaffer, the daughter of William Thomas Campbell, founder of Texaco, and wife of Robert E. Lee Blaffer, founder of Humble Oil (later Exxon), promised major works of art in her collection toward the building of a teaching collection housed

Pollock Galleries at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. Under Robinson's curatorial leadership, the Pollack gallery hosted exhibitions of world-renowned artists such as Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, Edvard Munch, Willem De Kooning, and Frida Kahlo all during the late 1970s. One of the most glamorous—and heavily guarded—exhibitions ever to be hosted at Blaffer was French Royal Jewels from the Smithsonian in January 1975. During the brief, one-week viewing, Houston audiences were stunned by the pair of dazzling 36-carat diamond earrings belonging to Marie Antoinette, and the tiara and necklace given by Napoleon to his second wife, Marie Louise.

In 1976, the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, established by Mrs. Blaffer two years prior to her death in 1975, initiated a



Installation view Julian Schnabel Exhibition, 1988

Photo courtesy Blaffer Gallery



Mike and Doug Starn

Photo by Rick Gardner

at the university. Dedicated on March 13, 1973, the new museum immediately became a vital force in the presentation and promotion of the visual arts in Houston.

Assistant professor of art, Richard Stout, served as Blaffer's first acting director and the museum opened its inaugural exhibition season with a solo show of the controversial work of Texas artist, Michael Tracy, in September 1973. One of Stout's first initiatives was to reinstitute the Houston Area Exhibition, originally mounted at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, which had discontinued the open juried competition 13 years earlier. From the very beginning, exhibitions of works drawn from the Blaffer Collection were augmented by regular presentations of student and faculty work.

In late 1974, William Robinson was appointed as the museum's first full-time director. Robinson had previously worked at the McNay Museum in San Antonio, and had been director of the

touring exhibition program. The inaugural exhibition, American Abstract Expressionism, included important works by artists Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning. The program was one of the first of its kind in the nation to underwrite all major exhibition costs, offering exhibitions to museums and universities throughout Texas free of charge.

In 1979, the success of the traveling program prompted the Blaffer Foundation to reacquire the Blaffer Collection from the University of Houston and to take full charge of its care and circulation. The collection and foundation are now housed at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Without the burden of caring for a collection of its own, Blaffer Gallery's focus shifted to the staging of temporary exhibitions.

Esther de Vécsey, director of the Sewall Art Gallery at Rice University, joined Blaffer as associate director in July 1983. De Vécsey expanded Blaffer's mission as a community educational resource by combining scheduled exhibitions with lectures, symposia, related artistic events, and programs for special community groups. She remarked in an interview, "Galleries shouldn't be

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of the Blaffer Gallery

passive buildings sitting silent, full of art work, waiting for those who 'understand' art to come in. They should be active places of learning where people can bring their own experiences, knowledge and tastes and contribute to the art work that's there." She was appointed museum director in October 1984.

During de Vécsey's tenure, Blaffer Gallery presented many exhibitions and programs through collaborations with other departments on campus and Houston-area arts organizations. Reconsidered Modernism was a special lecture series co-organized with the College of Architecture in conjunction with the exhibition *The Architecture of Richard Neutra*, with guest speaker architect Charles Gwathmey. A juried festival of independent film and video artists, expo 85, was coordinated through SWAMP (Southwest

During this second decade the museum strengthened its commitment to exhibiting a wide range of art in a variety of media by both emerging and established artists from around the world, and established relationships with other organizations within the community with shared interests in the spirit of collaboration.

In 1994, after nine years as director, Marti Mayo resigned to return to the Houston Contemporary Art Museum as director. Don Bacigalupi, UH alumnus and former Brown Curator of Contemporary Art at the San Antonio Museum of Art, assumed the helm as director and chief curator in January 1996. His most notable project was *Michael Ray Charles, 1989-1997: An American Artist's Work*, which opened at Blaffer in 1997, and traveled to the Austin Museum of Art and the Contemporary Arts Center,



Installation view *My Favorite Things and Other Rent Party Songs: New and Classic Works by Tierney Malone, 2001* Photo courtesy Blaffer Gallery



Installation view *Robert Knox: Non-Fiction Paintings, 2003* Photo courtesy Blaffer Gallery

Alternative Media Project) in conjunction with the exhibition *Video: Media and/or Message*. And in the summer of 1984, as the Children's Museum of Houston completed negotiations for its own museum building, Blaffer Gallery hosted their inaugural project, *Kidtechnics*, a participatory exhibition and learning environment that explored modern technology.

September 1986 brought about another change as Marti Mayo, former curator at Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum, became Blaffer Gallery's third director. With her strong curatorial background, Mayo focused on gaining recognition for the museum by organizing exhibitions and publishing catalogues that addressed "art on a multi-disciplinary basis."

Also in 1986, the university administration and the gallery's advisory board refined exhibition policies, formalizing an emphasis on art of the past 100 years and committed to a more vigorous community presence and scholarly role within the city. In 1989, the advisory board and the university's Board of Regents adopted the mission statement that defines Blaffer's role as a bridge between the university and the general public.

Cincinnati. The catalogue won three first prizes for publication design from the American Association of Museums, Texas Association of Museums, and Houston Art Director's Club.

The museum celebrated its 25th anniversary '70s style, in 1998, hosting *A Night at Studio 25*, a retro-style disco dance party. From May through September 1999, the museum closed its doors for some much-needed renovation, including a new climate control system, passenger elevator, and additional second floor exhibition and office spaces. The makeover allowed for greater flexibility in the scope and scale of exhibitions that could be presented. That year, the 1999 Master's of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition was held at Lawndale Art Center, an alternative space whose origins were in UH's Department of Art. Also that year, Bacigalupi departed to head the San Diego Museum of Art.

Following another nationwide search (the third in five years), Terrie Sultan was appointed to the post in June 2000, coming to Houston from Washington's Corcoran Gallery of Art, where she had been Curator of Contemporary Art for 12 years. Following a thorough review of the established long-range plan, staff and board

retreats in Fall 2000, and a series of discussions with community and university leaders, the museum further refined its mission and vision to strengthen the exhibitions, publications, and educational outreach program by focusing on contemporary art, with an emphasis on exploration of the creative process.

In November 2000, Blaffer hosted the first of what has become one of its most popular adult programs—the Contemporary Salon. Inspired by the turn-of-the-century cultural salons, the program encourages informal but informative dialogue between experts and members of the general public. Sultan also initiated a much-needed redesign of the newsletter and the first issue of NEWSLINE was published in spring 2001. In addition to information about museum programs, NEWSLINE also provides a forum for scholars to share ideas about contemporary culture.

On her one-year anniversary as director, Sultan faced her biggest challenge when Tropical Storm Allison arrived full force during the opening reception for the exhibit, *Radcliffe Bailey: The Magic City*, on June 8, 2001. The exhibition would be remembered as the shortest ever on view, having been open for only two hours during the preview. Flooding and loss of power from the storm forced the museum to close for the summer. The building and the art within remained safe—thanks to three 40-foot trailers with



Installation view Chuck Close Prints: Process and Collaboration, September 13–November 23, 2003 Photo courtesy The Art Museum of University of Houston

diesel powered air conditioning and dehumidifying units parked just outside the door.

Summer 2002 brought the collaborative project *Seeing and Believing: The Art of Nancy Burson* to the museum. Co-organized by Blaffer and the Grey Art Gallery at New York University, it was the first of several large-scale retrospective exhibition and publication projects that Blaffer would develop cooperatively with sister institutions. Under Sultan's leadership, the museum has expanded its program to present more than eight exhibitions each year, most of them originating at the museum before traveling the world. The exhibition program addresses the cultural diversity of its audience and encompasses artists from different backgrounds, gender, age, and ethnicity with a special focus on emerging or under-recognized artists to bodies of work by artists of international renown.

The museum continues its historical commitment to regional

artists by presenting one exhibition each year which focuses on or includes strong representation from Texas artists such as Tierney Malone, Margo Sawyer, and James Surls. In addition, the museum has presented the Houston Area Exhibition every four years since 1974 and has continued with nine such exhibitions over the past 30 years.

Over the past decade, Blaffer Gallery broadened its programming, audience, and base of support. In 1996 and 2001, Blaffer Gallery received a General Operating Support grant from the Institute of Museum Services, recognition by professional peers as a museum operating at the highest professional standard. This year, 2006, Blaffer Gallery was again awarded a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, this time for its innovative educational outreach program "Art Focus."

In the past five years, Blaffer Gallery has also received highly competitive awards of support from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc., and Altria, Inc. The institution is now positioned for a new period of growth and development that builds on its many past successes.

In 2004, Blaffer Gallery became part of the *Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts* at the University of Houston, a permanent alliance with the Schools of Art, Theatre, Music, and the



Installation view Terry Allen: Stories from DUGOUT, April 16–June 12, 2005 Photo by Rick Gardner

Creative Writing Program, formed to encourage interdisciplinary collaboration between these five artistic units on the campus. Blaffer Gallery has taken a lead in developing programs with the Mitchell Center that fulfill its mission to explore, challenge, and celebrate the intersections between art forms through public programs, artist residencies, and curriculum in the performing, literary, and visual arts.

Over the past 30 years, Blaffer Gallery has grown into a world-renowned institution, now boasting 11 full-time professional staff members and dozens of student interns, education assistants, installation crew members, work study assistants and gallery attendants. While the focus of the museum's mission—the presentation of art that is culturally relevant and artistically significant that engages the community with the important issues of our time—has remained the same, the scope and ambition of those programs has grown significantly. 📖