

# 50 Years of Blaffer Art Museum: A Historical Overview

By Pete Gershon

*Dedication of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Gallery, March 13, 1973.*

Photo by Caudill Rowlett Scott courtesy of Digital Collections,  
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In the early 1970s, Houston was shaking off its mid-century identity as a provincial backwater. The Johnson Space Center directed regular flights to the moon. The city's major league ball club played in a futuristic, air-conditioned dome. The Texas legislature approved selling liquor by the glass in 1971, enlivening nightclub and restaurant culture. The rise of a new corrugated steel building for the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston catty-corner from the sleek Mies van der Rohe expansion for the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH) guaranteed that the arts would play an increasingly important role in the city's future. Within this forward-thinking environment, the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Gallery opened in the University of Houston's (UH) new Fine Arts Building in March 1973.

The gallery was conceived as the home of a teaching collection of twenty-seven old master paintings loaned or donated to the school by the wealthy and influential Blaffer family. This included Sarah Campbell Blaffer, the daughter of Texas Oil Company founder William Thomas Blaffer, and the wife of a cofounder of Humble Oil. "This remarkable woman planned and generously provided the Blaffer Collections of the University," reads a dedication in the catalogue documenting the gallery's inaugural exhibition. "In doing so, she combined a powerful teaching medium and the means of making students more aware of the work of master

artists and craftsmen, and capable thereby of sustaining themselves more fully in body as well as in spirit."<sup>1</sup>

UH officials began talking publicly about a new building for the art department as early as 1964 with the enlistment of Caudill Rowlett Scott, a Houston-based architectural firm, which had designed high schools and college buildings and was already engaged in the Jones Plaza (1966) and Albert Thomas Convention Center (1967) projects. The new Fine Arts Building was part of a period of rapid growth at UH that saw twenty-five buildings constructed between 1963 and 1973. These included the 7,100-seat Hofheinz Pavilion, Bates College of Law, Stephen Power Farish Hall, Melcher Gymnasium, and the Moody Towers residence halls.

In April 1970 the Board of Regents approved a contract with Tellepsen Construction Company based upon their nearly \$4 million bid for the 100,000-square-foot complex. The Fine Arts Building would feature offices and classrooms for the art department, the 200-seat Dudley Recital Hall, another recital hall to house the school's Beckerath pipe organ, and a modest art gallery with reddish-brown glazed tile flooring and a prominent central staircase leading to a carpeted mezzanine.

The Blaffer Gallery, formally dedicated on March 13, 1973, opened with a display of the donated Blaffer Collection paintings. "Lots of pomp and circumstance," remembered UH assistant professor Richard Stout, who was named



Mike and Doug Starn with Blaffer staff in fall 1991. Left to right: the Starn brothers; Namita Wiggers, education programs coordinator; Catherine Angel, head gallery attendant; Marti Mayo, director; Alexandra Irvine, administrator; Davis Northcutt, gallery attendant and preparator; and Osamu James Nakagawa, graduate intern.

Photo © Osamu James Nakagawa.

acting gallery director. During a brief but impactful term, he organized a presentation of sacramental sculptural paintings by his close friend Michael Tracy and reinstated the Houston Area Exhibition, an annual juried competition of local work that MFAH had hosted until 1960.

A nationwide director search resulted in the September 1974 hiring of William A. Robinson, director of the Pollock Gallery at Southern Methodist University for the previous three years. Robinson established a rhythm that included annual student shows and exhibitions by graduating master of fine arts (MFA) degree candidates. The gallery served Houston's broader art community with ongoing Houston Area Exhibitions and rotating selections from the Blaffer collections. A touring program became so popular that the Blaffer Foundation reacquired many of these paintings in 1979, creating a small endowment for future programming. Most of the Blaffer Collection paintings are now on display in MFAH's Beck Building.

Often the gallery hosted traveling shows organized by other institutions, including the first posthumous American retrospective of Pablo Picasso's work, the first Frida Kahlo exhibition in the United States since 1938, and a show of new works by Willem de Kooning. Occasionally Blaffer curated original presentations, notably, an Edvard Munch retrospective produced by Peter Guenther in the spring of 1976. Robinson vied with the Museum of Modern Art in a David-versus-Goliath battle to land works for the two institutions' competing exhibitions of *fin-de-siècle* Viennese art and furniture presented three years later.<sup>2</sup>

In its first decade the Blaffer operated as a teaching gallery, bringing students into close contact with the Blaffer family's old masters. Its second decade saw the gallery coming into its own as a venue for more contemporary, multimedia work by emerging and established artists of international prominence. When UH hired Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH) curator Marti Mayo to assume leadership

of the Blaffer in 1986, the gallery's exhibition policies had just been updated to emphasize contemporary art and maintain a more vigorous local presence. With the support of curatorial assistant Liz Ward, Mayo authored a series of exhibitions that broke new ground for the Blaffer and the careers of its featured artists. A small group survey of work by women artists, *6 Artists/6 Idioms*, was organized in conjunction with national conferences for the Women's Caucus for Art and the College Art Association. *Gael Stack: A Survey* was the first solo museum show for the painter and longtime UH faculty member.

*Julian Schnabel: Crows Flying the Black Flags of Themselves* is arguably the most high-profile of Mayo's headline shows, as Blaffer's first solo offering of work by a UH graduate held



Installation view of Julian Schnabel: *Crows Flying the Black Flag of Themselves*, on view June 1-July 31, 1988.

Photo courtesy of the Blaffer Art Museum.

in conjunction with an expansive exhibition at the MFAH when Schnabel's popularity was at its peak. Mayo remembers it as the pinnacle of both quality and attention during this era. When Mayo left in September 1994, she had more than doubled the Blaffer's annual attendance and developed a program for teenage docents that served several thousand Houston students each year.

Following a search for a new director, the university chose alum and *summa cum laude* graduate Don Bacigalupi. Bacigalupi's crowning curatorial achievement was the eight-year survey of work by Michael Ray Charles, a then thirty-year-old UH alum represented by Barnes-Blackman and Moody Galleries. For years, Bacigalupi had followed Charles's work referencing stereotypical images of African Americans from the antebellum South. The exhibition met with backlash even before it opened. "The work was [labeled] 'too incendiary,' 'too dangerous,' and 'too hot to handle,'" recalls Bacigalupi. "One advisory board member quit in protest, colleagues in town worried for me, and the media began to swarm. I felt confident, however, that the Blaffer team could and would present an exhibition that would facilitate dialogue, offer robust educational opportunities, and foreground the important challenges the work contained."<sup>3</sup>

After a dazzling retrospective of the drawings and sculpture of UH professor Luis Jimenez, the Blaffer galleries



closed in 1999 for remodeling, including a new climate control system, passenger elevator, and over 3,000 square feet of office and gallery space. During the pause in on-site programming, Bacigalupi announced his resignation and longtime Blaffer registrar Nancy Hixon stepped in as interim director. The annual MFA show was held off site at Lawndale Art Center, a nonprofit art space that emerged when fire displaced the UH art department in 1979.

Terrie Sultan, former curator of contemporary art at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., was selected as the Blaffer's next director in May 2000. Sultan's exhibition program focused on developing original shows featuring a more diverse selection of emerging and established artists, including Jessica Stockholder, Angela Grauerholz, Bob Knox, and James Surls, as well as the first show of prints by the conceptual portraitist Chuck Close, which traveled to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and twenty museums worldwide. Most of the shows originating at the Blaffer during this era went on to other institutions and were accompanied by catalogues.

The nature of the Blaffer and its relationship with the university changed in 2004 with the establishment of the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts, an interdisciplinary programmatic alliance between the UH School of Art, Moores School of Music, the School of Theatre & Dance, the Creative



Chuck Close with Terrie Sultan.

Photo courtesy Blaffer Art Museum.

Writing Program, and the Blaffer Art Museum. The first collaborative project featured the work of visual and performing artist Terry Allen and actress Jo Harvey Allen in a theatrical performance of the Allens' *DUGOUT III* at the Wortham Theater, presented in conjunction with the 2005 Blaffer exhibition *Terry Allen: Stories from the DUGOUT*. Workshops within Allen's two-week residency engaged twenty students in fine arts, theater, creative writing, and music programs.

By the time Sultan departed in April 2008, Blaffer's operating budget and staff size had doubled, and it enjoyed an enhanced reputation as one of the country's finest noncollecting university museums. Sultan's successor was found close at hand. Claudia Schmuckli had joined the Blaffer in 2004 as its director of public relations and marketing, before being elevated to adjunct

curator in 2006 and taking up the fundraising and curatorial oversight duties when Sultan resigned.

Schmuckli organized a run of shows by Leonardo Drew, Jon Pylypchuk, Gabriel Kuri, and Johan Grimonprez that cemented Blaffer's reputation as a place for emerging contemporary artists dealing with site-specific installation, new media, and research-based practice. In 2010, underscoring the gallery's evolution and refreshed sense of identity, the board approved changing the name from Blaffer Gallery, the Art Museum of the University of Houston to the more succinct Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston.

The 2008 recession crushed nascent plans for a new museum building, but a comprehensive, \$2.5-million architectural redesign in 2012 by New York-based firm WORKac—working with Gensler's Houston office—substantially improved visibility and accessibility. A new street-facing entry featured a modern, translucent glass façade containing cantilevered interior steps to the second floor. The gallery's outdated glazed brick flooring was replaced with poured concrete. The original courtyard entrance remained, opening to a café and lounge space.

The updates necessitated a summer-long museum closure, during which Schmuckli kept up momentum with "Window into Houston," a series of off-site installations by local artists in a row of downtown display windows at 110 Milam Street, and with the Blaffer's presentation of an exhibition by Anton Ginzberg at the 54th Venice Biennale.

The new galleries opened in the fall with *Room to be (Ms.) understood*, a feminist reclamation project and an exercise in participatory social sculpture by Mitchell Center artist-in-residence Lynne McCabe. The exhibition was a series of classes, lectures, discussions, and performances featuring visiting artists and thinkers that brought new meaning to the old idea of a "teaching gallery." Schmuckli's career-spanning survey of sculpture by Tony Feher followed, the product of three years of planning and research (during which the artist advised on the gallery's redesign). Feher died unexpectedly less than three years later while planning an



Programming during Lynne McCabe: *Room to be (Ms.) understood*, on view August 28–December 4, 2012.

Photo courtesy of the Blaffer Art Museum.