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Donna Terek / The Detroit News

DIA director Graham Beal objected to bringing in a major traveling exhibit. "We want the emphasis to be on our collection."

DIA's opening gambit

Is decision to forgo a blockbuster a stroke of genius or risky business?

Michael H. Hodges / The Detroit News

Advertisement

When the Detroit Institute of Arts reopens Nov. 23 after extensive renovations, you might think it would run with a big-name, attention-grabbing exhibit to generate excitement and rake in the crowds.

You would be mistaken.

Instead, the DIA is opting for a risky strategy featuring a "Best of the Best" show from its own collection, as well as an exhibition, "City Sitings," by a young painter with Michigan roots, Julie Mehretu.

The question at hand is how best to market a new product -- in this case a revamped museum and a collection reorganized to be more



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user-friendly -- to get the biggest pop, one that ripples beyond longtime museum-goers into new populations and age groups.

"The idea is to draw folks who wouldn't normally go to a museum," says University of Detroit Mercy marketing guru Mike Bernacchi, "but would have heard of the artist -- Rubens, say. If you want as much fanfare as you can get, go with a brand name that's well-known."

DIA director Graham Beal begs to differ.

The question of a major traveling show, he says, came up in strategy discussions "only to be immediately dismissed. Philosophically, we want the emphasis to be on our collection, which is better than any traveling show I could imagine."

The two planned exhibitions are undeniably worthy. But neither has the sex appeal of the museum's 2002 "Degas and the Dance" or 2001's "Van Gogh: Face to Face." The latter, in particular, was a huge success, pulling in an unprecedented 315,000 visitors and generating some \$91 million in spin-off revenue for the city of Detroit.

Those yearning for famous names will have to wait nearly a full year after the museum's reopening, when the DIA will host "Monet to Dali: Modern Masters from the Cleveland Museum of Art." Until then, however, the shows in the 2007-2008 season are ones that would be largely unrecognizable to anyone but an art enthusiast.

It's virtually the same strategy pursued by the Denver Art Museum when it inaugurated its eye-popping new building by Ground Zero architect Daniel Libeskind last October, a strategy with mixed results. "We felt the building itself was so exciting that it would be like having a special exhibition that first year," says Denver's assistant director Vicki Sterling.

But that's an advantage Detroit won't have. Whatever one thinks of the rebuilt wings, designed by Michael Graves, they were always meant to act as discreet "background" elements that wouldn't overshadow the 1927 Paul Philippe Cret original.

Yet even with a building that drew national and international attention, Denver fell short of its visitor projections. According to the Denver Post, the museum had hoped for 1 million visitors the first year. They'll wind up, says Sterling, with a little more than 600,000. "I think we projected very enthusiastically," she says.

Denver won't host a "big-name" exhibition until October, when they'll mount "Artisans and



David Coates / The Detroit News

The DIA is nearly done with its six-year, \$160 million renovation. Its north and south wings were rebuilt, adding 35,000 square feet in gallery space. [See full image](#)

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Kings: Selected Treasures from the Louvre."

To be fair to both institutions, however, most museums that have opened new facilities in the past few years eschewed the big-name shows in favor of low-key, or local, exhibitions, a list that includes the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, San Francisco's DeYoung Museum and the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto.

"Blockbusters do well during the life of a show," says museum consultant Peter LaPaglia from Murfreesboro, Tenn., "but then you have a major drop afterward. You pull in all these new members, and then they don't renew."

From San Francisco, Adrienne Horn, president of Museum Management Consultants, thinks Beal and his crew are on the right track with a reopening that spotlights the institution's own collection -- in this case, its treasure trove of prints, drawings and photographs.

"Doing the 'Best of the Best' isn't a bad idea," she says. "The big focus should be on the reinstallation."

As for the choice of Mehretu's "City Sitings," that was based, in Beal's words, "on wanting something very modern and very 'now.'"

Mehretu, 36, a painter born in Ethiopia who grew up in East Lansing, has exhibited at Washington's Smithsonian Institution, the Minneapolis Walker Art Center and New York's Whitney Biennial. She'll also be shown next year at the Deutsche Guggenheim Museum in Berlin.

DIA staff were looking for "someone compelling," Beal says, "and Julie's work seemed particularly wonderful because our collection is heavily Western European and European-American."

The artist told Rebecca Hart, who's curating "City Sitings," that the Diego Rivera Court constitutes "the embodiment of her early memories of Detroit."

But Beal dismisses any idea that Mehretu was picked in the hopes of attracting what's become the Holy Grail for museums -- that much-coveted younger demographic.

It just doesn't work that way, Beal says. "The connection between contemporary art and a young audience," he says, a bit sadly, "is not straightforward."

The DIA is on the home stretch of a six-year, \$160 million renovation. Its north and south wings were rebuilt, adding some 35,000 square feet in new gallery space.

Additionally, connections between the old building and the two wings were simplified to make getting around easier than in the past.

The biggest change, however, may be in the way the museum has reorganized its displays -- moving away from the traditional country-by-country approach toward an orientation that places artwork in its historical and social context.

Another consideration factoring into the big-name-or-not question for cash-strapped institutions is money. Blockbusters tend to be enormously costly.

But Beal says the real issue with the November reopening -- apart from a desire to hype the museum's own stuff -- had everything to do with staff.

The museum is halfway through the mind-numbing process of rehang and reinstalling the roughly 6,000 paintings, statues and artifacts that will fill its 152,000 square feet of galleries, including new acquisitions and much that's been in storage.



Denver Art Museum

The DIA is following the strategy of the Denver Art Museum, which opened a new building in October. [See full image](#)

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"Our technicians are completely absorbed," Beal says, "and we knew they'd be working right down to the wire."

Interestingly, he adds that the two shows just before the May closing -- "Ansel Adams" and "American Music," an exhibition of Annie Liebowitz photographs -- were chosen precisely because they were "technically easy to handle," and less of a strain on an institution about to haul everything else down into the basement.

Equally busy is the marketing staff, which is organizing a range of events around the reopening to attract as much attention as possible, including a Nov. 10 black-tie gala fundraiser.

And on opening day itself, Nov. 23, the museum will stay open more than 24 hours -- with performances, music and entertainment -- for the first time in its long, venerable history.

"We also have a new marketing campaign we're going to unleash on an astonished world," Beal says, "but I don't think I'm allowed to talk about it."

Those who love the DIA can only hope that campaign sizzles.

Still, Bernacchi says, "They're not going to be able to make a good first impression a second time. They've got this one great opportunity. I hope they know what the hell they're doing."

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