FINDING CENTER

Bo Bartlett Center at CSU brings more than just art to Columbus

Q&A WITH DAVID HOUSTON | ARTS CALENDAR | SPRINGER PRESENTS ‘MOTHER OF RAIN’
LETTER from the EDITOR

Happy Birthday, “Big ToDo!”

It’s hard to believe that this issue marks the end of our magazine’s first year. The best part about growing a niche publication in our town has been finding new ways each month that our magazine can help readers admire all that Columbus has to offer.

In our first year, we’ve covered ballet, Beethoven and everything in between. The wide array of events is best attributed to the fact that Columbus provides us with exciting events to highlight. However, instead of just reporting the details, we’re proud to say that we focus on the people behind the scenes who are making things happen day-in and day-out.

This month, I sat down with one of the biggest movers and shakers in town. David Houston is the executive director of the Bo Bartlett Center and is an internationally recognized arts administrator who has been in the business of making artists’ dreams come to life for decades. When I sat down with him, I was taken back by his leadership, his progressive vision for the center and his impeccable ability to incorporate all of Bartlett’s wishes into the final product. It’s more than just a building, too. Houston and Bartlett have teamed up with Columbus State University to ensure that the center’s reach extends far beyond its walls. Columbus is already on the map in our region as a cultural gem, but the Bo Bartlett Center at CSU will make our presence known internationally.

In other news, we have four productions in town this month that you really shouldn’t miss. The Springer brings us a unique duo with “Mother of Rain” and “The Who’s Tommy” while the RiverCenter will showcase “42nd Street” and Schwob School of Music’s annual Kaleidoscope concert. There are too many reasons to list as to why you should see each of these shows, but they are all worthy of your time. We’ve highlighted each of them this month, as well as other events happening in the next few weeks. This is an issue to read cover to cover, so grab a cup of coffee and get ready for an exciting month in Columbus.

Carrie Beth Wallace

APRIL 2016
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Curating Creativity

David Houston, director of CSU's Bo Bartlett Center, discusses their first student art exhibit

Q: In your field, what is the most interesting project you've worked on prior to this one?
A: Well, like artists, the most interesting project is always the current one. But the most interesting thing to me period is working directly with artists. A lot of curators do not like to work with living artists because they talk back and they have their own ideas. I like the dialogue. I like the give-and-take. And again, if you use the artist you're working with as a consultant for the project itself, it becomes much greater than one person's vision.

Over the years, I've had the great opportunity to work with some of the great living artists of the world: Cindy Sherman, Sally Mann, William Eggleston, Mark di Suvero. I'm working now on a project with an artist named Ed McGowin that's going to be in Shanghai, China, in the coming year. Working with lifetime accomplishments is also something that interests me. A lot of curators want to find the next hot young thing, but for me, finding people who have dedicated their life's work to art and have lifetime accomplishment is where I want to work. I want to work with people with depth and a great deal of history behind them, but are still pushing and creating. There are a lot of them out there. I'm working right now with a 92-year-
old artist who has two exhibitions right now in New York City. He’s still painting within the studio system at 92. He’s a classic example of how art keeps you going. His name is Kendall Shaw.

There have been several rewarding exhibitions over the years. There was a deceased artist retrospective show of the great Gulf Coast artist Walter Anderson. He was a naturalist and lived right on the Gulf and would row a canoe 27 miles out and live two weeks at a time on a barrier island. He’d make work there and then put it in a garbage can and tie it shut and put it in the canoe and come back.

The Smithsonian did a live retrospective and I worked with that project and expanded it to his interest in New Orleans, where he was born. So here’s someone whose entire life is lived in nature with nature and the art is about nature. The resonance throughout the exhibition was just remarkable.

As a curator, you handle that work and you hold the pots in your hands and you put the work on the wall and it just comes alive in a different way.

**Q:** How did you start doing this career? I’m very interested in how you found this path.

**A:** I started studying ideas in college with philosophy and comparative literature. I discovered that art history synthesized everything for me. So I have my degree in art history. The teacher I studied with is Italian. She was also a curator. Several of us were trained in curatorial work and worked with her on international projects. As an art historian, you tend to work with books and ideas, but once you’ve worked with objects and audiences it gives it a different reality and a different satisfaction. I knew right away that working directly with objects and bringing and interpreting objects to audiences was my interest more than the scholarly side, although that is certainly a part of it. For some people, that’s satisfying enough. It wasn’t for me.

**Q:** What else should the public know about you personally?

**A:** I’ve kind of alternated teaching and working with museums. When I do one, the majority of the time I tend to do the other part time. I was a college professor from age 32 to 42 and then from 42 until my mid 50s I was largely a museum person and taught occasionally. I supervised students in arts administration. Then I came here three years ago to put together the Bo Bartlett Center at CSU, which will be one of the most unique art projects in America.

**Q:** I am assuming that the Bartlett Center is what brought you to Columbus. Is that correct?

**A:** Yes. I had organized an exhibition with Bo in 2009. I had known Bo for a
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number of years before. I met him in 2004, and before that I knew his work. So knowing Bo, working with that exhibition, knowing the excellence of the Schwob School of Music (at Columbus State University) and what’s been accomplished in music, it was just obvious to me that you could accomplish the same excellence with art, especially working with somebody like Bo. Scott Harris, the director of the Schwob School, and I work very closely together. We have a Steinway piano that is going into the Bartlett Center.

We will be doing music as an extension of what we are doing. What I am telling them is to do things that are small-scale, do things that are experimental, bring people from out of town, let’s create a chamber music series. I am organizing the faculty show for the art department and we are doing two panel discussions. I’ve split the faculty into two groups of four and I’ve told them that I am going to invite a surprise guest.

The first is a composer from Schwob, and the second is a conductor. So we will have this formalized partnership with the Schwob working with us from the beginning.

**Q: So what won you over about this specific project?**

**A:** The uniqueness. It’s going to have an archival gallery and in the archive we are going to have hundreds of drawings and sketchbooks and diaries. You are able to tell the story about an artist’s formation, creativity and work processes in a way that museums can’t. With Bo and the community of artists that surrounds him, which are people that influence him and people that he’s influenced, we are able to tell a real story that will change over time with the archival holdings.

Also, working with a mid-career living artist is a different experience. Having worked with so many living artists in the museums I’ve worked for — the chance to take the academic institution with a focus on one artist? There’s nowhere else like it.

**Q: Can you list for me all of the different ways that Bo and the center are already involved actively in the community?**

**A:** He has a program in the schools that will be featured in the April exhibition. Then he has “Home Is Where the Art Is,” which provides art activities for the homeless. Bo also offers a Friday morning drawing class at his studio. There is a model and he asks that everyone chip in to help pay the model. He also offers his annual master class in March of each year. In addition to that, there are a series of lectures, art and heritage sites. Oh, look! This is where I used to be at Crystal Bridges.

**Q: Wait. You were at Crystal Bridges before this?**

**A:** Yes. A friend of mine took that shot from the helicopter.

**Q: What has your involvement been with the book other than connecting Bo with the publisher?**

**A:** I’ve written part of the book. Bo and I identified Carter Radcliff, who is editor at an art magazine and a very distinguished writer on the arts. We were very pleased to have his contribution to the book as well.

This is the first real comprehensive book about Bo and his career. The others have had a focus on exhibitions and had a certain focus on the paintings available. Rather than just focus on the paintings that we have in the center, we have included the entire scope of his work. Going through Bo’s images and choosing was actually quite a task.

**Q: Bo has a new book coming out this spring. How have you been involved in that process?**

**A:** Here, let me show you the catalog it’s in so you can see the company he’s with. It’s Scala Press and he’s listed in the same section as Edward Munch and Andy Warhol. It’s very exciting. There are only a few other living artists that they’ve worked with. If you look, all of the projects that they work with are normally museums or cathedrals. They do archi-

Bartlett and his wife Betsy march at the corner of the street. Eby is an artist and accomplished pianist.
of public lectures and film screenings that we do. These are just prototypes and teasers of what we will do on a regular basis once the Bo Bartlett Center is open.

So we are sort of just dipping our toe into the swimming pool and trying to get an idea of timing, audience, place and need. Because you can offer some great programs, but if there isn’t an audience or need, it’s a misfit.

What we are trying to do is to use all of these projects as a test case, to know where to put our emphasis on public programs when we open the Bo Bartlett Center. Students are obviously going to be a focus, and the community at large is going to be a focus, but underserved populations by the focus is also another area that will be explored. You know, how to engage audiences is a nut you have to crack wherever you’re doing programming.

Q: So let’s talk about the April event. It’s an exhibition highlighting his work in the schools, but whose artwork will it feature?

A: It is an exhibition from Bo Bartlett and the Bo Bartlett Center’s school residency program. The program is called “Art Makes You Smart” and is sponsored by a grant through the Walter Alan Richards Foundation. The program involves Bo and several of our board members. It is being directed by Jan Miller who works with me. She’s the coordinator of the program.

Last year, we did a pilot program and Bo did a lesson on how to draw a head. He took a clay model of a sculpture of something he was working on and put it in front of the young people and they drew the head with Bo. Last year he was at River Road Elementary and South Columbus Elementary. Based on that, we made up a flyer this year and sent it out to the schools and had a surprisingly strong response. So he’ll be working with young people of all different ages — in high schools and lower grades as well. Some in Harris County and some in Fort Mitchell as well.

Our goal is to continue working with the homeless with our program “Home is Where the Art Is,” and then parallel that work with the outreach work Bo is doing in the schools. This is really one of our most fundamental missions, to take art and creativity and imagination into the local community. Bo and our board members are just a great resource. With cuts being made in the arts in the schools, there is a real need to supplement. Touching lives in every way is what the center is about, whether it’s adults or young people.

This is one way to go directly to them in the community and let the Bartlett Center have an impact before we open. It’s the perfect start. It shows where the heart of the project is, which is touching people. It’s about community. The community the center develops will expand throughout the region and the nation and beyond, over time. We will take work from here and take it afar, and we will bring work from afar here to this community.

As we build collaborators and partners, that idea that the Bartlett Center is a community of creative individuals is one of the keys.

Our footprint is relatively small — the space is only about 20,000 square feet — but the ideas behind it and the way that we want to extend our reach through collaborative networks is a really big idea.

We are going to be event-heavy. When we open, we are going to have films and lectures and artist talks and summer camps for young people. The whole idea is to have it as an active creative learning center with art at the center of it, rather than have it function as a museum. It is going to be something dynamic and open and a place that will continually bring in people for different reasons.

If you just put pictures on the wall, people will come in once every two years and think they’ve seen it.

But if you use those pictures and the creativity behind them to enrich people’s lives and get them actively thinking and working and doing, it’s a different thing.

If You Go...

What: “Art Makes You Smart” Exhibition from the Bo Bartlett Center Residency Program

When: 5-7 p.m. April 21

Where: RiverCenter for the Performing Arts

Cost: Free

Call: coa.columbusstate.edu/ thebobartlettcenter/

More to Know: This exhibit will feature work from students in seven schools that Bartlett is working with this Spring. Bartlett will also be present to discuss his experience working with the children.