

The Nassau Museum And Long Island's Future

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By Charles Riley



Guests take a look at the new exhibits at the Nassau County Museum of Art.
(Photo courtesy of Charles Riley)

A constant and gratifying source of surprise for those of us who work at the Nassau County Museum is the uncanny way that works of art offer glimpses of the future. Like writers of science fiction, painters and sculptors often have vatic powers to foresee the possibilities others simply cannot perceive, one of the reasons we follow the avant-garde (it literally means those who are ahead of the troops).

Among the tremendous talents in our current show, the brilliant Paul Klee is justly renowned for his prophetic gifts. This valuable power attracts a certain type of viewer, the sought-after “early adapters” of advanced ideas, and many of these in turn are business leaders who succeed by being early. As I casually chatted with as many of my visitors during our successful reopening, I noticed a demographic trend that could be a portent of Long Island’s next economic chapter.

Just as our marketing surveys had predicted back in April, the older members of our community were not ready to come back right away, but a new group of fresh faces were at the door every single morning—art lovers who had never visited before. I had a bit of fun with hipster jokes because I was touring with couples and families in their mid-twenties, some with little kids, who were on the run from Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens and desperate for their art fix. At least a hundred of them turned up. One of my favorite couples was Alan and Angela, both in the arts and clued in to the major-league stature of the artists on our wall. We are still the only game in town for major art while the city’s museums and galleries that show some of the international art stars on our walls right now remain dormant, so I was having a ball discussing Sean Scully or Jeffrey Gibson, huge figures on the contemporary art scene, with architects, filmmakers, teachers and marketing executives who left me with a lovely and telling compliment (and I quote two of them verbatim), “If we knew we had a world-class museum like this in our neighborhood, we would move here.”

The lift that a healthy museum gives to a region is called the “Bilbao effect” for the resurgence that the Guggenheim Museum sparked in a once-crummy Spanish city. MassMOCA (the giant arts complex in western Massachusetts) has measured the positive economic impact of a major museum upon their neighborhood. Great art fosters innovation, and is a constant source of ideas for those in the fields of marketing, media, design and architecture and other aspects of the “knowledge economy.” I cannot help thinking that a new chapter in the Island’s cultural and economic history may be ready to be written as these clever kids (I am terribly old), many of them dossing in their parents’ homes for the summer, decide to put down roots.

I grew up here, and I hope the economic problems we currently face will encourage us to re-think the dormant model of the “bedroom community” so we create jobs. As Laura Curran continues to lead us so ably into a recovery, the resurgence of the region relies on this new blood. At the Nassau County Museum of Art, we are ready to play our part in painting this pretty picture.

—Charles Riley is the director of the Nassau County Museum of Art