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Visual Arts

USF Contemporary Art Museum uses creativity to keeps the shows going

By Lennie Bennett, Times Art Critic
In Print: Sunday, June 7, 2009

TAMPA

"Museum at Work" is an atypical exhibition, as its title suggests. The University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum is doing what a lot of institutions are these days: finding ways to put on a show with diminished funding. You will see in the coming year national and local museums bringing in fewer expensive special exhibitions and turning to their permanent collections to round out schedules and save money.

CAM has about 5,000 works, mostly prints, in its collection. Its leaders could have easily hung some of the rarely seen ones and said "ta-da." Instead they chose a more unconventional solution to current economic challenges. They are focusing on the permanent collection but in the most literal way, setting up a photography studio in one of the galleries to shoot pieces from it, which are being rotated in and out daily. It's an administrative task that they are turning into a sort of performance art for visitors (though a very gentle and subtle one) and, more important, an educational experience that illustrates the importance of documentation.

"We have images for only about 1,500 objects," says curator Peter Foe. "This was an opportunity to photograph more of the collection for documentation and to interact with people as we do it."

Documentation is central to art history. Because of it, we're sure that Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel and Velasquez painted *Las Meninas*. Without it, experts can only speculate.

You would think documentation is an issue only for older art. Actually, it will probably always be an issue, though it's less of one now with computers. Still, there can never be a complete inventory of everything artists create from cradle to grave. And we would care only if the artist's stature was great

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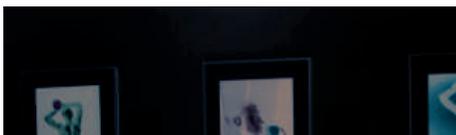


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enough, a determination only time can make.

You begin to understand the problems presented by documentation.

Sometimes artists keep good records of their works and sales. Museums and large galleries are probably the most diligent keepers of such information. But it's a back-of-house operation that requires money without generating any. You need staff to photograph the image and process a work's history, to create a database.

Foe doesn't have much of either to work with but has been joined by a number of volunteers, both students (not just art majors) and off-campus arts lovers to help. Most days you can see them buzzing around or punching away on computers. Computer stations are also set up for visitors' browsing of the collection. Foe is almost always around and likes to talk about the collection and the project, so do "bother" him.

• • •

"Sixty Minutes," also at CAM is more like a traditional art exhibition, except it isn't. Curator David Norr, like Foe, has also turned something inside out, this time the artist. The "show" consists of four video monitors with headphones that run movie, TV and news clips, some iconic and some obscure, chosen by four artists as a way of discussing some of their influences.

"Art can be opaque and hard to access," Norr says. "I want to find new ways to explain what artists are thinking about. I invited them to put their influences and sources into a video essay with a mashup format. The one limitation was it could be only 60 minutes in length."

You're probably thinking: four artists, four 60-minute videos, four hours of my time, no way.

The nice thing about these videos is that there is no narrative you must see from start to finish. This isn't art, and isn't meant to be. It's like a little autobiography, ingenious in that you need no special artspeak or background to learn more about the artists who either have been exhibited at CAM or will be.

You'll be surprised at what most of them chose: the longest fight scene in cinema history from John Carpenter's *They Live*; Parisian slaughterhouses; Jerry Lewis clips; Michael Jackson and young Bobby Brown videos; Jane Fonda working out and Mary Lou Retton acing the Olympic gymnastics competition.

A large table with chairs holds catalogs and books with work by the artists in case you're curious about how their essays translate in their work.

I was.

And I left the museum feeling a lot smarter than I had before entering.

Lennie Bennett can be reached at lennie@sptimes.com or (727) 893-8293.

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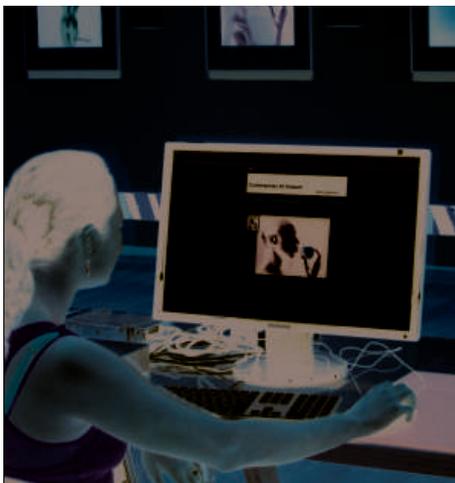
CAM exhibitions

At University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum. "Sixty Minutes" runs through July 2, "Museum at Work" through July 17. 4202 E Fowler Ave., Tampa. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday and 1 to 4 p.m. Saturday. Free but \$4 parking permit required. cam.usf.edu or (813) 974-2849.

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"Museum at Work" volunteer Katia Setti uses the online database to research a photogravure on display, Robert Mapplethorpe's Ken Moody.

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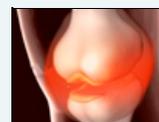
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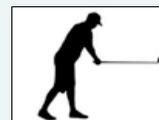
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