

Small but **Mighty**

University gallery in downtown Charlotte
wields outsized influence



By Michael J. Solender

Spend any time in the small and unadorned Projective Eye Gallery in uptown Charlotte and it is hard to imagine how this awkward trapezoid space that fronts Ninth Street has been at the center of such significant socio-cultural events in Charlotte since early 2012.

Ken Lambla, dean of UNC Charlotte's College of Arts + Architecture, and Crista Cammaroto, director of galleries for the University, comprise the nucleus of a formidable team responsible for the two prominent University galleries: Projective Eye and Storrs on the main campus. Projective Eye is redefining the role of art in an urban setting.

That bold and challenging exhibitions are coming from a University gallery underscores the realized vision of these two key innovators, instigators actually, in setting out to create a crossroads for ideas and art that makes a difference in the way an urban community interprets and sees itself.

When planning for the UNC Charlotte Center City building, which opened in 2011, Lambla was adamant about having a prominent gallery within the space. "It was critical in my mind to have an academic exhibition incubator in the center city and a showcase for the creative work that was being done," he said. "I resisted even calling it a gallery, preferring at the time to speak

in terms of incubator and a laboratory — the University has a responsibility to a community to use engagement not as a form of entertainment but as a platform for taking risks other people can't take."

What he means by taking such risks is that this gallery isn't for "nice" faculty work and "safe" exhibitions.

ENGENDERING DIALOGUE

Cammaroto concurred with Lambla on taking risks and wanted the gallery to create lively forums and curious encounters based on the works of global, regional and local artists in a wide variety of media. She also wanted the gallery to be an opportunity for students

and faculty seeking to make statements and engender dialogue through their art.

“Part of my job is to shine a light on the best of our UNC Charlotte creative intellect by creating a venue that exudes an openness to the community of Charlotte for collaborative ‘new work’ exhibitions and performances from our own faculty,” Cammaroto explained.

The gallery’s opening exhibit in early 2012 featured Charlotte artists and educators John Hairston Jr. and Antoine Williams, both UNC Charlotte alums. They depicted Queen Charlotte as a Moorish queen bee surrounded by worker bees in a mural suggestive of students and their teacher. Their art challenged the relationship between those traditional roles and the notion of who serves whom and in what capacity.

One of the gallery’s most recent shows raised the controversial notions behind a community’s homeless population taking a role in the development of its own shelter. Organized by Charleston’s Halsey Institute, “Favelas: Architecture of Survival” offered 48 large-format photographs by Brazilian photographer Pedro Lobo depicting the notorious Rio de Janeiro squatter settlements.

“This gallery is not a space for student shows or faculty boasting,” Lambra said. “What happens here is scholarship ... bringing forward the role of culture in the identity of UNC Charlotte.”

SIGNIFICANT TRIUMPH

The “Violins of Hope” exhibit is a great example. It has been the gallery’s most significant triumph of cultural programming, representing an artistic coup that saw the broad community rally to both participate and celebrate the exhibition in the spring of 2012.

Curated by the College of Arts + Architecture, Violins of Hope made its North American debut in Charlotte, showcasing 18 violins recovered and restored from the Holocaust by Israeli master violinmaker Amnon Weinstein.

The extensive programming surrounding the exhibition brought together faith-based, academic and cultural institutions in ways that strengthened community bonds. Receiving international accolades, Violins of Hope helped to define Charlotte as a New South city with its own artistic landscape.

Beyond such blockbuster programs, Projective Eye Gallery has also used its

influence to raise public awareness of important community contributors and artists worthy of deeper exploration.

Cammaroto snared one of the most significant arts patrons in Charlotte and turned the tables on him, showing his talent, depth and breadth as an artist. In the exhibition “Andreas Bechtler — The Artist,”



Cammaroto got her subject to open up and share his energy and enthusiasm for his work and the zeal in which his process all but consumes him.

DNC AS SPRINGBOARD

Another exhibit that spurred community discussion was “E Pluribus Unum,” which opened in advance of the 2012 Democratic National Convention in Charlotte.

“Both residents and visitors need to know we (the University) are not afraid to have open conversations about issues that matter,” said Cammaroto. “It was important to me to present a divergent point of view with this (exhibit) and not make this about one party or the other.”

E Pluribus Unum was one of the most striking and “in your face” exhibitions at the gallery to date. Cammaroto chose more than

a half dozen regional artists to display work that confronts the viewer with profound questions about the role of government, individual responsibilities and civil disobedience. It was a remarkable montage that took advantage of convention timing and showed off the space with a meaningful exhibit that spoke to the concept of

democracy. Some galleries simply let their space out to the highest bidder during this period, missing an opportunity to showcase their core values the way Projective Eye did.

In what has become quite a ride, the University is now seen as a promulgator of arts and culture in uptown Charlotte in ways that the public may not have anticipated, but clearly are fulfilling the goals of Lambra and Cammaroto.

Lambra also points out that many arts and cultural activities are tertiary benefactors of the building and the gallery space, which have hosted concerts, discussions, films and other events that may have struggled in years past for a venue. Possibilities being realized in the space seem endless. And that is a key point for a gallery that is expanding the notion of the arts and culture in Charlotte.