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Mass MoCA opens building dedicated to Anselm Kiefer's art

By Jennifer Huberdeau, North Adams Transcript

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Mass MoCA Director Joseph Thompson leads a press tour of the new exhibit on the Mass MoCA campus on Thursday. (Gillian Jones/North Adams Transcript)

NORTH ADAMS -- The new long-term yet temporary Anselm Kiefer exhibition at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Arts, held in partnership with the Hall Art Foundation, is the beginning of a new era at the museum, according to its director.

"I think this opening signals the next five to 10 years of development here at Mass MoCA," Director Joseph Thompson said Thursday during a press tour of the new 10,000-square-foot Anselm Kiefer Hall Art Foundation building, which officially opens today. "Over the first 12 years we've been open, we created our own shows with this rollicking schedule of always-changing exhibitions, always temporary, side-by-side with performances and music festivals. We had a particular focus on work from mid-career and emerging artists -- that was the heart and soul of what we did."

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But in 2008, the museum introduced a new model of programming with the launch of its Sol LeWitt exhibition, a 25-year long collaboration between the museum, Yale University Art Gallery, Williams College Museum of Art and the studio of Sol LeWitt. At the same time, MoCA also opened its doors to artists and other institutions, providing space and time for the creation of new works.

"It's a strange thing. It's a beautiful thing," Thompson said. "I doubt the Metropolitan or the Museum of Modern Art would ever invite an entire third party in and give them space for a significant amount of time to do new programmatic work and essentially put forth a curatorial vision that's not always theirs."

Thompson added, "I want to point out that structurally, in building this museum and looking toward the future, I like a series of milestone installations -- that go deep and go very long -- side-by-side with our free-wheeling program of changing exhibitions. We're delighted the Hall Art Foundation and Andy and Christine Hall have joined up with us to help shape this fundamentally new model of museum building, based on the sharing of museum infrastructure, such as ticket taking, docents and security. We're creating a real economy by coming together on common ground and bringing public the work on the scale we do here at Mass MoCA"

The Kiefer exhibition, which will run seasonally for 15 years, is housed in a galvanized steel warehouse built upon a cement water trough -- a remnant of the former five-story Building 15 -- and is the latest large-scale show that has found a home at MoCA.

The cavernous building holds three of Kiefer's works, including "Narrow are the Vessels," an 82-foot-long wave-like structure of concrete and rebar; "Velimir Chlebnikov," a steel pavilion containing 30 paintings inspired by the theories of the show's namesake -- a Russian mathematical experimentalist; and "The Women of the Revolution," a piece made up of 20 lead beds honoring French women who played pivotal roles in the country's wars.

"The building, the construction, the new road and gate -- all of that is 100 percent paid for by the Hall Art Foundation. They are paying 100 percent of the operating costs -- the utilities, electricity, security and all the other Things," Thompson said. "Mass MoCA does the ticket taking, the educational docents and provides all the other museological infrastructure."

He added, "There is no pretense that this art is going to come to Mass MoCA. It all belongs to the Hall Art Foundation. If, at the end of the 15-year agreement, they choose not to renew it, the art will go back to the foundation and we'll keep the building and the improvements."

For more information, visit www.massmoca.org.