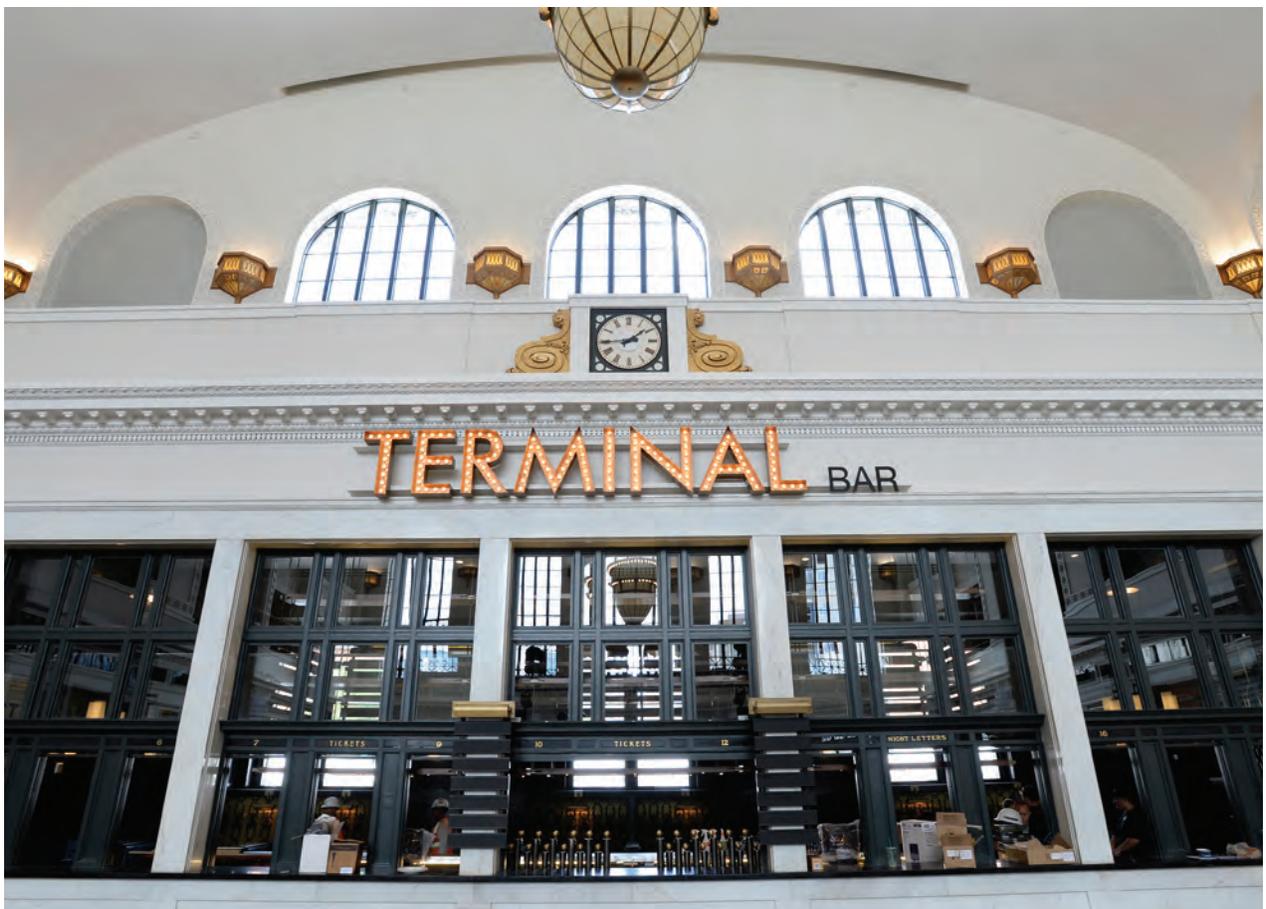


THE DENVER POST

Published October 19, 2014

DID DIVERSITY MISS THE TRAIN?

The urban playground at Union Station isn't drawing people of color, and it may be the building's fault.



Details in the Union Station restoration hearken to rail's heyday. *Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post*

STORY 1

BY RAY MARK RINALDI

Thursday, 1 p.m.:

186 whites, 1 black, 4 Latinos, 4 Asians.

Friday, 6 p.m.:

647 whites, 6 blacks, 6 Latinos, 7 Asians

Saturday, 11 p.m.:

693 whites, 4 blacks, 2 Latinos, 7 Asians.

It's dangerous to assign race to people simply by glancing at their faces. Some people don't look at all like their race. Many people are a mix.

But if my recent counts of people in the restaurants, bars and shops in and around Denver's rehabbed, reopened Union Station are even close, it's an overwhelmingly white place. How can the new cultural jewel of our city — where 47 percent of the population is minority — draw a crowd that is 98.2 percent Caucasian on a bustling, buzzed Saturday night?

The station's owner, the Regional Transportation District, worked long and hard

to develop a city center that would reflect and showcase Denver's particular personality. None of the eateries are chains; the beers are Colorado-brewed. The architects, builders and programmers who turned the original 1914 building into a contemporary social hub are nearly all local.

But walking through the station, it doesn't look at all like Denver in 2014. More like Denver in 1950. More like Boise, Idaho, or Billings, Mont. This is a public place, owned by all of us, open to all, but the invitation to visit was declined by many, and it's obvious who isn't showing up.

Three months in, the place hums early and late. The Crawford Hotel on the top floors is a hit, and the best 8 p.m. restaurant tables are gone weeks in advance. A few years ago, the station was a ghost town. Now it is wildly popular, and in many ways, a smashing success.

If, that is, you are white and not paying attention. Or if you think diversity doesn't matter. If you do, you can't help but feel like something is off amidst all the clinking of martini glasses in the swank Cooper Lounge on the mezzanine, or the low hum of pucks sliding across shuffleboard tables in the Great Hall.

If you are a tourist — and there is hope the station will impress out-of-towners with our farm-to-table menus, craft cocktails and trendy gift shops — you might get the idea that Denver doesn't have people of color. Or worse, you might think it's one of the most segregated cities in the U.S. That's not the case.

We're not perfect, certainly, and the city has its share of streets where only one sort of family lives, bars where people hang out with their own kind. Sometimes that's segregation; sometimes it's just folks being themselves among themselves, celebrating common stories.

But we're no St. Louis, a city where decades of inequality has the good citizens at a boiling point. Our two biggest gathering places, the indoor shopping mall in Cherry Creek and the outdoor mall on 16th Street, are a sea of faces, cutting across skin color

“

Union Station is programmed toward wallets. You need a password to use the WiFi. Its product is elegance, even exclusivity. You can't even find the Cooper Lounge unless you know where you are going; it's set up for insiders. Exclusivity has its own historic baggage. Whether it's about keeping Jewish people out of a subdivision or gay people out of the military, it historically benefits the majority.”

and social class. They can get gritty, and good for that; this is an American city after all, with all of the pleasures and problems of New York, Los Angeles, Chicago.

Architecture of exclusivity

It's easy to speculate why things are different at Union Station, though it requires some less elegant thinking about the way people of different ethnicities behave, some stereotyping. That's more dangerous than going room-to-room at the station, divvying up faces by the way they look, and keeping tallies on my iPhone.

Let's start with the building itself, the actual architecture. Union Station is a neo-classical mix of styles — European styles. The symmetry, arched windows, ornate cornice and stacked, stone walls have their roots in the glory days of France, England, Greece and Rome, in empires that were nearly absent of ethnic minorities and who felt fully at ease invading, exploiting and



Denver Union Station hosts a public event for their grand opening celebration featuring food trucks and live music on Wynkoop Street and free tours of the building. *Kathryn Scott Osler, The Denver Post*

actually enslaving the people of Africa, subcontinent Asia and South America.

Yes, that's all in the past; things have changed. But the \$54 million renovation of Union Station doesn't take that into account. It restores the symbols of an old world with no updates. The gilded chandeliers have been rewired, the marble polished, but there's no nod to the present, no interior walls in the bright colors of Mexico, no Asian simplicity in the remix. There are no giant sculptures by African-American artists bonused into the lobby, no murals on the basement walls.

Would any of those updates have made Union Station more welcoming, made it "Ready for the Next 100 years," as its marketing proclaims? Could they still?

A preservationist might object to physical updates. Restoration is about the exact, the original. History has its ups and downs, the thinking goes, and you can't blame buildings for the good or bad that happened. But a preservationist just might end up with a building that draws mostly white

people — with a Union Station.

The present restoration harkens back to Union Station at its height, in the first half of a 20th century when many Americans suffered the social indignity and economic disadvantage of a segregated America. Denver's neighborhoods, parks, schools and social amenities were divided sharply by race.

Denver's branch of the Ku Klux Klan, one mayor a member, kept things in their place.

The trains themselves were not officially segregated here, but you can bet many people on them boarded or disembarked in stations where blacks entered in separate doors and rode in restricted cars.

Denver's bigshot bigots are gone, schools and workplaces desegregated. But the structures of back then look the same — are they to be honored or altered to make the past palatable for everyone?

The programming does little to mitigate the obstacles. The local restaurants and chefs that made it onto Union Station were the city's highest-profile operators whose establishments serve mostly white clien-

tele, and their fans have followed along. Minority businesses were part of the station's redevelopment, but many of the key players were white, too. These people are not racists. They are our among our best, most creative thinkers.

Still, something is missing. There's no traditional Mexican restaurant, no soul-food restaurant, no sushi bar, as if no one noticed that the Mexican-American, African-American and Asian-American families that own and operate those places across the city are also our best food purveyors.

This country is full of union stations, old train depots, once the center of civic life, that fell out of use in the auto era. St. Louis fixed up its station by adding a mall. It's not as successful, but it's diversified. Kansas City filled its hall with a science center, and kids from across the city's neighborhoods are regulars there.

Washington, D.C.'s train station now has swank shops, but also a food court. It has, notably, a B. Smith's restaurant, part of a small, African-American-owned chain that is a touchstone in the black community.

Where's a Subway?

A dangerous discussion? Yes, and surely faulty because the whole idea of race is fluid. My own counts, made on multiple visits, were based on appearance, not DNA, though I would argue that appearance matters.

Economics inevitably play a role here. Whites have more money in this city and, as a group, can better afford the hefty dining and drinking bills that often come with spending an evening in Union Station. A person could hang out in either of the above-mentioned malls for hours, strolling and shopping, grab a sandwich at Subway and not drop a lot of cash.

Union Station is programmed toward wallets. You need a password to use the Wi-

Fi. Its product is elegance, even exclusivity. You can't even find the Cooper Lounge unless you know where you are going; it's set up for insiders. Exclusivity has its own historic baggage. Whether it's about keeping Jewish people out of a subdivision or gay people out of the military, it historically benefits the majority.

That's only part of it, of course. Because today's Denver has a growing middle-class of minorities. Plenty of blacks and Latinos could afford to play at Union Station. The surrounding neighborhoods are diversified with residents who could simply bike over or take the light rail or downtown shuttle. There is no one at the door looking folks over. The workforce is mixed. There's no open policy of exclusion.

But there may be an institutional one. RTD had a thousand choices when it was rehabbing the station. It could have put in a farmer's market or a suite of micro-offices. It could have let its imagination run wild and installed a basketball court or a rec center, day-care facility, museum, a theater that any group could rent, an indoor playground, or yes, a Subway.

But it chose a different path. RTD, whose buses and trains are the most diverse places in Denver, created a monster of separation. You can't keep private enterprise from doing this sort of deed, but a public entity, a common asset, might have more democratic obligations.

Union Station will make plenty of money and that will help keep our transportation system solvent. But how much is lost?

This really was a chance to define today's Denver, to show off to the world, to say we are as interesting and relevant as anywhere you can name. But this project has defined us narrowly, darkly, negligently. There is danger in that, too.

THE DENVER POST

June 15, 2013

OVERSHADOWED IN GARDEN SUN

**Mother Nature's best efforts can't live up to Dale Chihuly's
giant, sparkling and brilliant-hued sculptures**



Members from the Chihuly studio team carefully place the pieces for "Summer Sun" as the Denver Botanic Gardens continues preparations for the outdoor exhibition by artist Dale Chihuly. Chihuly's design and installation team from Seattle are on hand installing the glass sculptures ranging in size, form and color across the 24-acre property. *Kathryn Scott Osler, The Denver Post*

STORY 2

BY RAY MARK RINALDI

Pity the poor *paeonia tenuifolia*. It's going to be a tough summer at the Denver Botanic Gardens.

The delicate flower's fern-like leaves don't stand a chance of getting noticed with artist Dale Chihuly's swooping glass ornaments spread about the grounds. No matter how pink or red its bloom, Chihuly's glossy, bulbous blobs will be pinker, redder, showier.

They're both things of beauty, the gar-

den's vast, organic bounty and the artist's hyper-hued baubles on display through November. The question is: How much beauty can you stand?

That depends on whether you see Chihuly's glass sculptures as an enhancement or a distraction for the flora's intrinsic perfection; as a lovely bit of jewelry for Mother Nature or an overload of gaudy lawn ornaments in her front yard. The exhibit leaves

plenty of room for debate among the tens of thousands who will wander the urban oasis over the next few months.

For sure, there are less conflicting ways of appreciating the glass master in the region this summer. In addition to the gardens' "Chihuly," there is "Chihuly Rediscovered" at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, and another "Chihuly" at the artist's local commercial gallery, Pismo Fine Art Glass in Cherry Creek North.

A glass lover can only wonder how many hundreds of thousands of dollars in art would be lost were Colorado to suffer an earthquake this season. Or a summer hailstorm.

But each exhibit shows a different side of the man who just might be the best-known artist in America. Chihuly, 72, single-handedly made the world take glass blowing seriously as an art form with his knock-your-socks-off chandeliers, his fragile seashells and birds, his baskets, balls, rods and cones.

With the help of a legion of assistants, he's set up his wares in the canals of Venice, Kew Gardens in London, the Tower of David Museum in Jerusalem. He helped glass find a place in the international art market with his work leading the way. A giant blue chandelier at Pismo is priced at \$325,000.

Even if you can't afford that, a trip to the gallery may be your best way to get up close and personal with a sampling of Chihuly's output. It's free and the work is shown to good advantage, spread out, lighted just right. Chihuly has experimented with numerous techniques, and there are good examples, plus some prints and paintings that give a clue to his creative process.

That said, the Colorado Springs show packs the most visual punch. The exhibit takes a local angle with 45 objects from the museum's permanent holdings and another dozen borrowed from Colorado collectors.

The star of the show is the massive "Orange Hornet" chandelier, a 9-foot-tall stunner with 384 individual pieces that the artist redesigned specially for the museum's 2007 expansion. There's also the "Persian Wall," a phalanx of golden-brown crustaceans mounted as a set. There are the

“

How much is too much? That's hard to say with Chihuly, a master of the big, bold expression. But those same overabundant qualities that make Chihuly such a thrill at the Pismo gallery and the Fine Arts Center can feel egotistical and competitive in the garden.”

brilliant "Macchia Forests," groupings of decorative pots, red on the outside, yellow on the inside, or blue or purple or green. They're the most saturated objects Chihuly ever made, and they glow like lava.

Still, neither the museum nor the gallery show come close to the scope of the Botanic Gardens extravaganza. The works abound for acres. They're dropped in fields and floated in ponds, and many are brand new.

This is a superstar effort, and a journey through it begins with all the whiz and bang Chihuly is beloved for. Visitors are greeted right away with "Blue Icicle Towers," a 2014 piece that explodes off a pedestal into shimmering shards of aqua and navy. Just a few steps down the path they encounter "Summer Sun," from 2010, a sphere of fiery, orange tentacles propped on a singular column.

But from there, the show changes character, as the garden begins integrating the pieces with the plants and fountains, and this is the point where some visitors might find it a bit aggressive.

There's Chihuly's "Perennial Fiori," a series of striped candy canes set in a bed of bearded irises and squat junipers. There's his "Monet Pool Fiori" with lavender reeds popping up from a pond, and his "Red Reeds" shooting through a field of prairie grass. There's a pink-and-white, frilly geyser rising from a cistern, blue Chihuly herons

stopping for a drink amid the aquatic grass.

The pieces range from striking to excessive to outright kitsch, as we get Chihuly ice cubes as big bed pillows and basketball-sized Chihuly bubbles floating in waterways. It devolves into Chihuly by the boatloads, literally, as rowboats are piled with a cargo of rainbow-colored Chihuly balls, a foot in diameter, that are set adrift amidst the garden's lily pads.

How much is too much? That's hard to say with Chihuly, a master of the big, bold expression. But those same overabundant qualities that make Chihuly such a thrill at the Pismo gallery and the Fine Arts Center can feel egotistical and competitive in the garden.

The Denver Botanic Gardens has had success in past years incorporating art into the grounds. In 2007 it presented "Chapungu," 60 stone sculptures from contemporary Zimbabwean artists. A follow-up exhibit of large-scale Henry Moore bronzes was one of the best shows of 2010 on the entire Front Range.

Those exhibits featured humble, figurative objects and made graceful connections between the garden and its human visitors. The art and the hyssop and plum trees got along well.

It's hard to say why the garden would let an invasive species like Chihuly take over so completely. Why put fake flowers next to real ones? It's tempting to connect it to the number of tickets it will sell, offering quick thrills over that thoughtful throughline that can make art and nature copacetic.

It's tempting, too, to tie it into the other thing you can't help but notice: The construction projects that are putting buildings in a community garden where greenery might be a better option. The cafe, the



The Denver Botanic Gardens' expansive show of giant glass sculptures by artist Dale Chihuly includes "The Saffron Tower & Cattails." *Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post*

learning pyramid, the research center feel as unnecessary and intrusive as Chihuly's hundredth electric blue balloon.

It's all competition for the plants and flowers and disruptive to the paradise so many of us run to when we need to escape the urban clutter.

For the poor paeonia tenuifolia, and many others who live in Denver, it's going to be a tough summer.

THE DENVER POST

Published Dec. 4, 2014

GRAND, FOR A DIFFERENT TIME

Three new skyscrapers in New York are enviable, but not in the 21st century.



In this Sept. 7, 2014 photo, 1 World Trade Center towers above the lower Manhattan skyline in New York. The One World Trade observatory is expected to open in late spring 2015. *Mark Lennihan, Associated Press file*

STORY 3

BY RAY MARK RINALDI

In New York, the boom never stops, though the noise has died down.

The country's tallest city is in the process of breaking three of its own, long-standing building-height records — three, and nearly all at once — yet few are cheering. Rather than marveling at new feats of engineering, or beauty, people obsess over safety and the shadows that will be cast on their neighborhoods. Times have changed.

In another America, there would be a

patriotic frenzy coast-to-coast over One World Trade Center, which opened last month on the site of the World Trade Center towers that were downed by terrorists in 2001. Rising a symbolic 1,776 feet, the skyscraper, designed by David Childs of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, tops any other structure on the continent.

Just a decade or so ago, envy would be widespread over glassy, glamorous One57, the 90-story condo building designed by

Christian de Portzamparc that debuted on the edge of Central Park this fall, smashing the record for residential high-rises. That benchmark will shatter again when architect Rafael Viñoly's 432 Park Avenue condos — 146 feet taller than the Empire State Building — opens next year.

Modern, man-made monoliths produced by brand-name architects, that's what made Manhattan the 20th century's urban idol.

But the 21st century has different priorities, better ones, actually, and these stiff spikes are embarrassingly out of synch.

These days, we are more down-to-earth. We crave humble, recycled, handmade. We want to keep it local, to be able to see the farm from the table where our dinner is served. There is a whole "tiny house" movement afoot.

We respect technology that is personal, invisible, practical. We aren't focused on fast elevators rocketing to \$90 million penthouses in the sky; we want connectivity, community. We want to text our friends, Tweet our business and get directions to the restaurant where we are meeting pals.

These new buildings are about exclusivity, separation. They are gangly safehouses for a few, built to keep things out: the stink of homeless people, the honking of taxi drivers, the latest terror, be it ISIS or ebola. They aim to hover above, at a time when New York's newest mayor, Bill de Blasio, was elected by looking down, running on a platform that blasted income equality as "the issue of our time."

In Washington, D.C, and St. Louis, the focus is on creating parks where all are welcome. In Los Angeles, the attention is on museums. In Denver, patient-centered hospitals and innovative public-housing projects are getting all the attention.

But Manhattan keeps going up, and the three tall buildings are an awkward fit even there. The two residential towers, in Midtown where restrictions are relatively lax, spike in a way that is neither graceful nor generous.

One World Trade Center stands as if its

“

In 2014, the new structures feel like yesterday's news. As with One World Trade Center, they're not interesting enough to keep the momentum going, to balance their overbearing weight on the bedrock and the psyche of the people who live and work around them, to account for the energy they use, the views they block.”

sole purpose is to remain standing, no matter what. It is hunkered in the ground on a 20-story, windowless base, sturdy enough to resist truck bombs. Finally, on the 21th floor it begins to have a personality, with its exterior corners chamfering in to form eight isosceles triangles along its sides.

The structure gets nimble for a while, and begins to soar adventurously as only a skyscraper can. Then it flattens abruptly, like a stump lopped at its 104th floor. A pointed communications tower caps it in a desperate reach for its emblematic top inch.

The building is an energy efficient, worker-friendly, \$3 billion piece of downtown real estate and, of course, more than that. It is a symbol of resiliency, a message that America can not be broken. No doubt hundreds of thousands of tourists will ride up to its observation deck when it opens next year. They will remember the hurt forever associated with the site where 2,606 people perished, but they will also feel relieved, elevated, undefeated. That's well worth the \$32 that a ticket to the top will cost.

With such strong emotions in the mix, it feels un-American not to like the place, weak, even traitorous. It's easy to revel in the idea that we have regrouped as a fight-



The towering Manhattan apartment buildings one57, left, and 430 Park Avenue. *Getty Images file*

ing force, retaken this ground.

That feeling is real, especially when one stands at the bottom and stares up, watching the gleaming glass interrupt and reflect the passing clouds. It is mighty, spectacular, emotional.

Yet there is an accompanying feeling of vulnerability, a sense that this isn't so secure place, but a target, and anyone could get close enough to do it harm. You look over your shoulder. You worry about the workers. The battle is won but the war is on, and a building can seem like an outdated piece of artillery, a lumbering tank in a time when combat has gone digital.

A building isn't a symbol, like a flag. It must work as shelter, protect its inhabitants. Can this one? Can we even ask such a question and not appear unpatriotic, or paranoid?

Perhaps, as a country, we do need a skyscraper on this spot to feel whole again. Ten-

ants have signed up; it's still prestigious to house your business in the king of buildings.

Condé Nast, publisher of magazines like "Vogue" and *Vanity Fair* took floors 20-44. Anna Wintour, the most fashionable woman in the known universe, will have an office on the 25th story.

The challenge of design is to make it all make sense. To some degree Childs' scheme does. If building One World Trade Center, or occupying it, are bouts of bravery, the structure serves the cause. Its bunkered-down flatness is tough and unrelenting. There, the symbolism works.

But as a real-life example of those qualities Americans brag about — our ingenuity, innovation, daring, exploration, flair — this place misses. It is defensive, logical, unoriginal.

The Twin Towers were nearly a miracle, built with a cutting-edge structural system

of tubes that allowed for open floor plans. Aside from premiering as the tallest building in the world, it recast the contemporary office interior far and wide.

Nothing about this new building is likely to be so influential, save its use of concrete and enhanced evacuation infrastructure. As for downtown flair, that seems left to foreign designers, like Herzog & de Meuron, the Swiss firm behind 56 Leonard, a wild, 60-story tower of irregularly stacked boxes now going up in Tribeca. Innovation and wonder are hardly dead.

But mere height is now ho-hum. The rest of the world has passed us by there, too. The Burj Khalifa in Dubai, at 2,722 feet, will always look down on us.

Back in New York, the two residential towers don't have the pressure of representing a country's might, though they do have to fend off criticism of their wastefulness. Reports have modest units going for tens of millions.

Plus, there is widespread belief that they will sell to the sort of international billionaires who spend little actual time in any one residence. Neighbors have already dubbed them ghost towers.

Neither is so striking or innovative, though that's not necessarily the designers' fault. Real estate is expensive in New York, meaning they sit on relatively small footprints. They are toothpicks by default, necessarily lanky on the way up, inevitably abrupt where their vertical downslide meets the street. Their spindliness is redeemed only by the fact that the shadows they cast on the relatively low surrounding properties (and into Central Park) are not so wide.

Christian de Portzamparc has worked with this limitation aggressively. His building is inspired by a waterfall topping out in a slim, curved column that gushes wider as it irregularly descends toward the street, where rippled steel bands on the bottom floors greet the sidewalk. One57 competes well for interest; its roof line varies, its glass walls are different shades, and it looks distinct from all angles.

Viñoly has gone the other way, fully em-

bracing the lankiness of the situation. His building is a relentless match stick with its four walls set at right angles. Each floor, at least those above the base, has six identical square windows. You can see it from miles around and from every direction it appears nearly identical. Truth is, there's not much more to say about it than that.

New Yorkers get to pick their poison. Vinoly's nod to modernism, eschewing ornamentation, embracing repetitiveness. Or de Portzamparc's post-modern leanings, fashioning new materials into abstract expressionist shapes and inviting viewers to see what they will in it.

Those of course, are the movements that defined the 20th century, when we were so wowed by our ability to go high that everything up there looked fun. Those glory days gave us the Chrysler Building and the United Nations.

In 2014, the new structures feel like yesterday's news. As with One World Trade Center, they're not interesting enough to keep the momentum going, to balance their overbearing weight on the bedrock and the psyche of the people who live and work around them, to account for the energy they use, the views they block.

New Yorkers, and the rest of us, are perfectly happy to look the other way as wealthy people and developers have their follies. We love the grand gesture; it's so American. But only if these acts give us something back in terms of beauty or prestige, only if they make the city a more interesting place.

Design is a selfish act when it ends in buildings that are little more than fancy addresses for their inhabitants. The one thing that belongs to everyone, in any city, is the skyline, and New York's skyline has the unique role of belonging to us all; 9/11 made that clear. It has nothing to do with symbols and everything to do with spirit and social conscience.

We don't want the city to be taller. We want it to be better. We want it to define us as a whole in interesting ways, to shape our collective identity.

THE DENVER POST

February 2, 2014

SHE SINGS FOR ALL OF OPERA

Renée Fleming is at the Super Bowl, modern music's largest stage. Building those bridges to outsiders is key to her mission.

STORY 4

BY RAY MARK RINALDI

If anything underscores the specialty art form that opera has become in the 21st century, it would be that the music makes its way through the era of celebrity without a single superstar in its ranks.

There's plenty of singing, and it sounds better than ever, but there's no Pavarotti selling out football stadiums and performing duets with Bono and Barry White. No Beverly Sills, a television natural, guest-hosting for Johnny Carson on "The Tonight Show." Nothing close to a Maria Callas, revered as royalty and gossiped about like a movie star.

The nearest thing is Renée Fleming, the Metropolitan Opera regular who, astonishingly, landed the music business' biggest annual gig, belting out the National Anthem at the Super Bowl.

Technically, Fleming's voice is 10 times better than the one possessed by Cher, Carrie Underwood, Beyoncé, Kelly Clarkson, Billy Joel, Garth Brooks or any of the other hit-makers usually tapped for the high-pressure job — though she sells one-tenth the records. Safe to say, few football fans know a true thing about opera or have heard Fleming sing.

That's not the soprano's fault. She's got everything it takes, and at 54, can still bring out the sexy in a ball gown.



Opera singer Renée Fleming sings the national anthem during Super Bowl XLVIII at MetLife Stadium between the Denver Broncos and the Seattle Seahawks. *Elsa, Getty Images*

“If Pavarotti came around today he’d be as great as he was, but he wouldn’t be as famous,” said Peter Gelb, general manager of The Met, the country’s grandest opera house and where Fleming happens to be starring in a current production of Antonín Dvořák’s “Rusalka.”

“It’s sad for me to say as the head of an opera company, but opera doesn’t have the same importance in society as it once did.”

And that is not opera’s fault, necessarily. All forms of live performance are suffering in an increasingly digital world where Internet surfing, video games and on-demand TV compete for leisure-time attention.

“It is very difficult to expect an art form that is long, that is in foreign languages, that requires some real attention and an intellectual kind of involvement to thrive in an environment which is going in the opposite direction,” said Gelb.

In no way is opera sitting back and watching this happen.

Opera America, the industry’s support group, touts the genre’s viability with both statistics and talk of emerging talents. As many as 6.7 million people might encounter an opera performance in some form annually, according to the group, though that number includes everything from free-festivalgoers to kids in school programs.

A more telling figure is that the association’s 97 professional companies with regular main stage seasons sold 2.6 million tickets last year. Not a shabby number, until you compare it to something like professional football, which sold about 17 million tickets last season and whose TV audience topped 108 million on Super Bowl day alone in 2013.

Break from “traditional” The correlation might be unfair, but numbers do matter. Opera, with its singers, scenery and orchestras, is expensive to make. A single production can easily cost half a million dollars. The industry doesn’t have enough customers to support the elaborate stagings of Handel and Verdi its history is built upon.

Companies have struggled. Opera Colorado, in particular has had to cut produc-

“

Fleming’s opportunities are her own, but also all of opera’s. If she scores big, the triumph might bolster an art form that could use the extra points.”

tions and stage emergency campaigns to stay in business.

“Traditional opera companies are fragile because of rising costs within the production field, and because of diminished audiences for traditional grand opera produced in traditional ways,” said Marc A. Scorca, Opera America’s CEO.

Scorca emphasizes the word “traditional” on purpose. Because, as he points out, presenters have found considerable success by adopting creative ways of keeping the work viable. Last April, for example, the Dallas Opera drew 14,000 fans to a performance simulcast in Cowboy Stadium and other venues. The San Francisco Opera’s annual free performance in Golden Gate Park has become a city tradition.

The field has adapted fairly well to technology and the Internet. By far, the best example is The Met’s live broadcasts to movie theaters around the world, which sell out from Russia to Argentina.

“There is abundant evidence of audience interest,” said Scorca. “The real challenge right now is for opera companies to connect with consumers in artistically valid and new ways.”

There’s a creative boom as well. The conservatories are turning out talented students, and companies are commissioning fresh material. More than 360 works have premiered since 2000, according to Opera America.

“There’s certainly an understanding that there are good works and good composers out there that need to be heard,” said composer Lori Laitman, whose new adaptation of “The Scarlet Letter” is on Opera Colo-



Renée Fleming sings the National Anthem at Super Bowl XLVIII at MetLife Stadium. *Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post*

rado's 2015 schedule.

Community relevance is key to getting people in the door, Opera America's Scorca believes.

Harlem Opera Theater, founded in 2001, has won over audiences by making African-American composers a focal point of its offerings. It's not uncommon to hear sacred vocal works in churches, or to see opera turned into an excuse to knock back a few, thanks to any of the 16 local chapters of the national organization Opera on Tap.

Building bridges to opera outsiders is part of Renée Fleming's career mission. Her personal repertoire includes major arias — she kills Puccini's beloved "O Mio Babbino Caro" — but reaches into Leonard Bernstein and Leonard Cohen, and as far as covers of indie-rock groups like Death Cab for Cutie. In November, she put together

the "American Voices" festival at the Kennedy Center, with a crossover lineup that mixed country's Alison Krauss, singer/songwriter Sara Bareilles, Broadway's Sutton Foster and pop's Josh Groban.

Her chance to build the longest bridge of all comes Feb. 2. Singing the Super Bowl's opening number can make you the world's darling, but it comes with risks.

Whitney Houston's 1991 turn (famously prerecorded) was so popular it was released as a single. Christina Aguilera was a national punch line for weeks after she flubbed the lyrics to America's song in 2011.

Fleming's opportunities are her own, but also all of opera's. If she scores big, the triumph might bolster an art form that could use the extra points.

THE DENVER POST

November 17, 2014

SPARKLING AND SHREWD

Cartier exhibit is a boost for the museum — and the company.



A Denver Art Museum installer placed Elizabeth Taylor's ruby and diamond Cartier necklace on display as they prepare on Thursday, November 6, 2014 for the upcoming show, "Brilliant: Cartier in the 20th Century." The necklace was a gift to Taylor by her husband Mike Todd in 1957. *Photo by Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post*

STORY 5

BY RAY MARK RINALDI

The Denver Art Museum's "Brilliant: Cartier in the 20th Century" is a boon for local museumgoers who are getting a rare chance to see a sparkling array of jewelry, unsurpassed in craftsmanship and historical significance, and undoubtedly worth tens of millions of dollars.

But, make no mistake, there's a bonus in it for Cartier, too, which stars in the kind of commercial that money can't buy. The exhibit focuses on Cartier's success in years past, but the company is still very much in business and happy to sell today's wealthy clients the same sort of shimmering neck-

laces, rings and watches lit to perfection in DAM's glass boxes.

In case anyone forgets the fact, a giant billboard hovers just a few blocks south of the museum on Lincoln Street, reminding all that Cartier's wares are available at Hyde Park Jewelers in nearby Cherry Creek.

"I am confident that the people of Denver will enjoy 'Brilliant' and that it will reveal to them the diversity, but also the permanence, of the Cartier style," says Pierre Rainero, who oversees the company's 1,500-piece heritage collection in Paris, where the bulk of DAM's objects come from.

His coy tone, touting the enduring place of the maison in history as well as the marketplace, underscores the delicate dance museums do with large corporations as they increasingly stage exhibits devoted to the work of single commercial entities. DAM did a similar show in 2012 featuring fashions from Yves Saint Laurent, but it's very much part of a wave, from New York to Beijing, that's showcased everything from Armani suits to Fabergé eggs.

Is the work museum quality? You could argue so. Do audiences love it? The shows are, by and large, blockbusters, bringing museums new faces and high revenues.

Still, they are suspect by their nature because they usually involve a high degree of cooperation between the corporation and the museum. In DAM's case, Cartier is not a financial sponsor, but it has fully enabled the effort by collecting its own works, assisting with research and installation and making available for loan the pieces it wants the public to see.

"Nothing in the exhibit is for sale," says DAM executive director Christoph Heinrich, who makes assurances that curators worked independently from sales-people, chose the specific objects themselves, and did the scholarly research that makes the exhibit resonate beyond its shimmering diamonds and rubies.

He places the effort fairly within DAM's mission of showing "how human creativity goes into other areas" beyond painting and sculpture. Indeed most of DAM's art collections, from Oceanic to American Indian, include some form of jewelry. Cartier isn't so out of place in the building.

At the same time, no one denies that museum exhibits are the ultimate in product branding. Every painter and sculptor craves a turn to show in the same, sacred rooms as Monet, Renoir, Rodin, Degas and van Gogh. They secure reputations and elevate the price of the goods for both the dead and the living.

A shimmering show

"Brilliant" is a good example of how mu-

“

(It's) easy to see how Cartier reflected and influenced style, but they also serve, less tastefully, as unauthorized celebrity endorsements for the company.”

seums work extra hard to infuse credibility into their flashier exhibits, offering a scholarly take on the jewelry and focusing on its social role in the recent past.

The story starts in the early 1900s, when Cartier adorned the titled classes from across Europe, selling well-crafted wares made of diamonds and gold and based on neoclassic designs. Cases gleam with tiaras, chokers, brooches and baubles of every kind.

The exhibit moves forward through time, using its watches and pendants, to explain how Cartier's style shifted with the rapidly changing tastes and habits of the century, taking influences from India, Africa and Asia. The exhibit, along with its exhaustive 270-page catalog, offers a clear sense of the rise of the American industrial tycoons and the fall of Imperial Russia.

Times and custom moved it forward into the Art Deco age, where geometric patterns in sapphires, emeralds and coral brought Cartier into the modern era, as it continued to expand into accessories, like handbags, clocks and cases.

Cartier's goods have been featured in museums across the globe, but DAM curator Margaret Young-Sánchez makes the show her own by including a section on pieces for men, everything from cuff links to whiskey flasks, and by documenting the popular rise of smoking by importing cigarette holders and ashtrays. Many of these objects, in particular, Rainero said, have never been shown in public exhibitions.

The display, put together by Paris designer Nathalie Crinière and featuring the same



Cartier's "Bandeau" from 1924 is platinum, diamonds and an approximately 51-grain natural pearl.
Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post

dark rooms and brightly lit objects she created for the Saint Laurent show, is enhanced with film clips and work sketches and a deep take on process explaining how cutters, setters and polishers all do their part.

It wraps with a section called "Icons of Style," with five glass cases featuring necklaces, rings and pins associated 20th century mainstays Princess Grace of Monaco, actress Elizabeth Taylor, the Duchess of Windsor, socialite Daisy Fellowes and Mexican movie star María Félix.

Credibility insurance

The icons, with their alluring photos, make it easy to see how Cartier reflected and influenced style, but they also serve, less tastefully, as unauthorized celebrity endorsements for the company. The show is big on context, but also glamour, as Rainero points out.

His official title — Image, Style and Heritage Director — reflects a similar mix of objectives and gets at the company's careful way of blending marketing with a well-deserved respect for its place in history. Cartier began seriously collecting its own work 20 years ago, buying back pieces from estates and at auctions. It now has finely honed holdings of about 1,500 objects and keeps an archive of data on Cartier's mentions in literature, public events and movies.

It doesn't show the materials itself but makes them available to museums, such as DAM, who came calling four years ago, before its success with Yves Saint Laurent. Young-Sánchez spent countless hours researching trends and looking at collections. In the end, she borrowed 200 pieces from Cartier and widened the exhibit by adding 50 more objects borrowed mostly from private owners.

Expanding the exhibit beyond Cartier's loans adds to DAM's desire to show independence from the company and that is enhanced by Young-Sánchez' own essays in the show's catalogue. They are meticulous and real evidence that she had the qualifications to make the choices she did.

But showing such evidence is wholly necessary for museums, which push their own boundaries presenting work with strong commercial ties. Young-Sánchez is actually the museum's curator of pre-Columbian art. She had some knowledge of gold used in antiquities but knew little of contemporary jewelry at the outset of her task.

Museums are also caught in the bind of needing to promote such shows without sounding like they are endorsing the products on display. Blockbusters, with their accompanying needs for extravagant staging and high security, are expensive to produce.

DAM surely hopes to draw more than the 400,000 visitors that came during its recent "Passport to Paris." That gives it little choice but to put out marketing materials that call the objects "stunning" and "precious" and label the company "one of the world's most prestigious names in jewelry and luxurious accessories."

In the end it has to rely on its long-term reputation and hope that is not damaged if things come off as crass. It's not by accident that DAM is also showing the traveling exhibit "Matisse and Friends" one floor down, another balancing act that heightens its credibility.

Will DAM's fans forgive the commercial aspects and just enjoy the jewelry? So far, so good. Tickets have already sold out for several of the time-stamped viewing opportunities during opening week.

THE DENVER POST

July 6, 2014

ST. LOUIS GOES BIG WITH “27”



Stephanie Blythe, left, portrays Gertrude Stein and Elizabeth Futral portrays Alice B. Toklas in “27.” Ken Howard, *Provided by Opera Theatre of St. Louis*

STORY 6

BY RAY MARK RINALDI

If you want to understand where opera is going in America you have to travel right to its middle: Missouri of all places, where Opera Theatre of St. Louis has premiered 24 works in its 39-year existence. No U.S. company has shown more leadership in the development of the art form.

This year’s fresh face in the repertoire is called “27” and like its title, the work is short; just 91 minutes first note to last. Other defining details: Five singers only, no chorus, in English, and entirely pleasurable.

You might not call it the all-American

opera because it takes place in Paris, but then again you might, because it is an efficient and highly productive work written by a composer whose melodies could just as easily work on Broadway. In that way that Americans like their culture, it is sexed up with celebrity. Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald sing in it; so do Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse.

More centrally, so do Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas who were shackled up, literarily and otherwise, in an apartment at #27 Rue de Fleurus where all of the action

in this opera takes place, from about World War I through about World War II.

Composer Ricky Ian Gordon and librettist Royce Vavrek pack a lot of questions into their piece, which is as terse as a made-for-TV movie, notable in a genre where a nice bit of Handel can tough it out for four hours.

What is genius and who gets to judge? Who gets to be famous and who doesn't? Who controls history?

Gordan and Vavrek answer the first two questions the same: Gertrude Stein. She is willful and stuck on herself, and yet powerfully charming as voiced by mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe, for whom the part was written. Her role as both tastemaker and kingmaker for a generation, even as an expatriate, was so strong that all of the artists of her day wanted her blessing. Picasso gets it in "27" when he paints her portrait. The avant garde photographer Man Ray isn't so lucky when he unveils his own painting of Stein.

"I've met many geniuses in my time," she sings to him. "You, my dear are a photographer."

The story of "27" is basically that: The parade of would-be wunderkinder coming and going from the house. It has a lot of humor in it. At one point, the opera has Hemingway and Fitzgerald actually wrestling for the title of genius at Stein's command.

As for the third question, it belongs to Toklas. She outlived Stein and wrote an influential autobiography that serves as the primary source for their life together. Portrayed by soprano Elizabeth Futral, she is alternately sweet and cloying. She is wife, secretary, servant, protector, defender and definer. It is Toklas who gets to declare Stein, author of a few notable tomes and librettos, the biggest genius of all. "27" utters the word genius 41 times.

There is a tender romance between the women, but the story isn't so sweet. Stein was a decorated hero of the first war, assisting wounded soldiers, but she might have survived the German occupation of France during the second by collaborating with the Vichy government. Another phrase — "How does Gertrude Stein stay safe, safe,

“

The acting, the journey, the brevity, it all says good things about American opera, serious things, and director James Robinson balances them with some precision. He lets the bigness of '27' shine through.”

stay safe?" — is repeated six times during that part of the story and her character is successfully smeared.

Gordon takes us through these highs and lows via a series of easy-to-like musical lines. The opera is tuneful, challenging in its quick starts and stops and changes, but not taxing. The arias move so fast, you might miss them.

The power comes from the pace, the reverse and forward of the note structure. Sometimes it unfolds like poetry, as when Stein gives a tour of her famous art collection: "The Cezannes are clustered over there/The lesser-knowns around the top/The Picassos are scattered every-which-where/Peruse! Peruse!"

This is fitting since Stein was known to write in a staccato stream of consciousness, and that makes it a good vehicle for Blythe, who can handle the turns and whose natural magnetism goes a long way toward helping us understand the power Stein had over her world. Futral, one of the better singing actresses working today, makes the relationship believable.

Thanks to the warm flow between music and words, the couple beams with the chemistry of two souls who are remarkably different but see the value in each other until death do them part. This connection is best expressed in its matter-of-factness and the kind of sweet duets that made the world fall in love with Rogers and Hammerstein.



Theo Lebow (in pink) as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Daniel Brevik as Ernest Hemingway in the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis 2014 production of “27.”
Ken Howard, Provided by Opera Theatre of St. Louis

Their sort of attachment is ultimately what makes this opera so American, as do the frequent interjections of one-liners and broad physical comedy.

That said, “27” aims higher than most Broadway fare because it isn’t afraid to be artful or dig into the way art defines our lives. Stein’s art collection serves as a stand-in for her own inner thoughts. The paintings actually come alive and sing to her, framing the discussion around her humanity.

The acting, the journey, the brevity, it all says good things about American opera, serious things, and director James Robinson balances them with some precision. He lets the bigness of “27” shine through; it’s opera and it ought to be a little grand, even in the 987-seat Loretto-Hilton Theatre.

But he keeps it intimate by maintaining the work as an ensemble piece. There are just five performers on stage, with the three

other singers taking on multiple roles, and it feels like a team effort. This prevents it from saying bad things about American culture in general — a star vehicle, how Hollywood. Blythe sings with her customary cashmere earthiness, but she never gets close to stealing the show.

In some ways, this little opera in this little venue feels important. It is every century’s job to define the century before it, and “27” isn’t afraid to do that with certainty and depth. It out-Toklases Alice B. Toklas by putting forth its own rough version of history, without apologies.

As important, Gordon continues the trend of synthesizing two forms that battled it out in the last century, classical and popular, and makes a stand that they can coexist. Rewriting European history with a charismatic, new world touch — that’s once and forever American.

THE DENVER POST

October 5, 2014

NO EASY ANSWER IN RACE DEBATE

Exhibit starts the dialogue, but the finish is up to us.



Bruce Marsden, left and Mark Henriksen work on a video installation for the new exhibit "Race: Are We So Different?" at History Colorado Center. *Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post*

STORY 7

BY RAY MARK RINALDI

Lately, our country has divided itself into two factions: One that proclaims we're afraid to have a conversation about race and another that is sick of hearing people go on about it.

It all depends on your definition of "conversation," of course, and both camps have valid points — those who shout about inequality in the streets after each black kid is killed and those who think, with an African-American president in office, that the dialogue is continual.

Walking into "Race," the new exhibit at

the History Colorado Center, I found myself agreeing with the second camp. The exhibit is a rich and important exchange of ideas about what makes us different and similar. Through a clever combination of text, artifacts, video and push-and-pull gadgets, it breaks down the long-standing myths guiding relationships between blacks, Latinos, whites, Indians, Asians and all combinations of the above.

The exhibit takes on disparities in wealth, health and education and has the kind of credibility that only real facts —

keenly told — can deliver. The sources here are geneticists, sociologists, economists, all with merit.

Exiting, though, I wasn't so sure where the discourse had left me. There were questions and answers, no doubt. But were they the important ones? The ones we really need to ask one another?

The display is comprehensive in the science of skin color, the history of housing and the methodology of medical care. But it's light on the psychology of hatred, the roots of selfishness, the dangers for a society ruled by prejudice. It rips apart our communal misconceptions, but treads lightly on our personal responsibilities.

It provides not the conversation, exactly, but a framework for the conversation — and the things it avoids show how difficult tough talk can be. Everyone should go see it, soon, so that we can really exchange opinions.

It's dangerous to even ask the pertinent questions: Why do cops hit other human beings? Why are so many black men pegged as absentee fathers? Why do white people cross the street when a person with dark skin approaches? Why haven't blacks, with all their fortitude, and whites, with all their advantages, managed to make the world a more understanding place?

Why has everyone — no excuses, so many years later — failed to achieve more?

Race isn't only about black and white, certainly. That's just what plays as crucial because of recent events in Missouri and Florida. It's really about every hair texture, eye shape and accent. "Race," the exhibit, is fully inclusive and often fascinating in its explorations. The touring show, assembled by the American Anthropological Association in collaboration with the Science Museum of Minnesota, has been a hit in several cities it has already visited.

The exhibit reminds us that notions of race are a social construct developed only a few centuries ago, that they were more about creating a class system than dividing people by their ethnic background.

We get real science about the gene pool, simple facts about DNA. We are reminded

“

It answers well the questions that can be answered by science. But it avoids those that must be answered with conscience.”

of atrocities, of land stolen from Navajos, of cruel experiments on Inuits, of biased intelligence tests that guided the learning of entire generations.

At its best, "Race" acknowledges imbalances and seeks to explain them. Whites are better off financially, but that is due, at least in part, to laws and customs that allowed Caucasians to be favored, from the legalization of slavery to the poorly administered GI Bill, from banks red-lining mortgages to real estate agents steering clients to segregated neighborhoods.

Blacks, Latinos and Indians are less healthy than whites, but maybe that is because of the way drug research has been carried out. Whites have more money than Asians, but one factor may be the history of our immigration laws and who was allowed to work and live where.

The exhibit has its highlights. A video, "I Am Not a Mascot," shows contemporary Indians, one after the next, identifying themselves and proclaiming they are more than the mascots that sports teams portray them as. "My name is Cindy Bloom and I'm Cherokee Indian," one says. "I am a grandmother, a teacher, and an herbalist, but I am not a mascot."

Another video has kids talking casually about where they sit in the school lunchroom. Tables are often divided by race, and the mixed-race kids can find it easier to skip meals altogether than try to fit in.

One display shows 21 color photos of faces across races. Push a button to see who has what blood type or who is short or tall or has a certain kind of fingerprint. and the pictures light up in surprising, cross-cultural ways.



The History Colorado Center is hosting a new exhibit “Race: Are We So Different?” Neal Wallace, an exhibit fabricator for the center, walks through the installation on Sept. 16, 2014. *Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post*

The few exhibits that allow visitors to tell their biographical stories are the most compelling. One person, writing on a note card, testifies she was not allowed to borrow a friend’s jacket because it had the American flag on it and “black people couldn’t wear things with the flag on them.” Another talks of being profiled as a shoplifter. Her anger is genuine.

These stories get to the heart of the issue. “Race” is not blameless by any stretch, though the blame comes across as a common fault, a historic fault, not a current defect in our character.

It answers well the questions that can be answered by science. But it avoids those that must be answered with conscience.

Questions about the N-word, about differences in social behaviors and cultural tastes, about everyday rudeness — those are where the next conversation needs to be centered. More to the point: The ways race figures into our acceptance of one another in movie theaters or on athletic

fields, at work, in church, at nightclubs, on golf courses, across college campuses and in jury deliberation rooms.

Perhaps this is as far as an exhibit can go when it is funded significantly by the government, via the National Science Foundation, and displayed in institutions who know too much controversy can offend donors and legislators whose money makes their existence possible.

“Race,” and the museum, go a long way in encouraging more dialogue. The exhibition is accompanied by public sessions where members of the community can take the talk as far as they want. There are ways to write opinions and narratives in the museum itself and to contribute electronically.

There’s personal responsibility in that, and a challenge to get involved, whether it’s just by going to the exhibit or by speaking out.

Denver will have its conversation — or it won’t — whether it is already having it or not.

THE DENVER POST

November 16, 2014

DREAMING BIG, VIA THE ARTS

With so much space to work with, a reimagined DPAC could reverse the trend of a more exclusive downtown.



A leadership team is looking for ways to reinvent the Denver Performing Arts Complex. *Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post*

STORY 8

BY RAY MARK RINALDI

Questions about art can seem unimportant in the greater scheme of civic things: picking the proper Shakespeare or Puccini this season a lower priority than choosing a qualified mayor for the next term; less crucial the acoustics at symphony hall than the speed of Internet access at the middle school.

But some cultural issues have everything to do with determining the quality of

our collective lives and the economic opportunities in our future, and Denver faces one of them right now: What to do with our great downtown theater campus?

This is a much grander dilemma than the ones we've jockeyed with lately over the 4-decade-old Denver Performing Arts Complex, which begins at the corner of 14th and Curtis streets and stretches 12 full acres.

Those were about refitting existing theaters to create solid homes for classical music and theater. Those were \$30 million questions.

This week, a 29-member committee, loaded with movers and shakers, begins a bigger task of deciding how the problems of a few aging venues — still functional if past their prime, no longer drawing a wide swath of citizens — can be transformed into a catalyst for an urban revival that keeps downtown the center of life in a city where large segments of the population have grown indifferent to its charms.

The Executive Leadership Team, appointed by Mayor Michael Hancock, has an expanded geography in its scope, looking for ways to tie the complex into the massive, city-owned Colorado Convention Center next door. It will consider incorporating the adjacent Sculpture Park into the arts mission, ways to leverage streets, outlying buildings — even air rights over the complex — with the potential of adding hundreds of thousands of square feet of new construction.

“There’s a lot of material to work with, real estate-wise,” as co-chair Marilee Utter from the Urban Land Institute puts it.

The committee has representation from the philanthropic community, developers, concert promoters and tourism officials as well as the downtown business association and the massive 150-acre Auraria campus just across Speer Boulevard. That puts a parcel many times the size of the current complex in play.

The committee is likely headed toward some sort of public-private partnership that could dwarf the recently completed Union Station renovation 10 blocks away. Who knows what it will come up with, perhaps something less ambitious, but one supposes the cost of the question will go up considerably.

A changing downtown

The goals for an improved DPAC are many, but one sits squarely in the center: keeping downtown a cultural hub, and by extension, keeping the urban core a place

“

The need for DPAC to evolve into something more relevant to the 21st century is pressing. Art options have blossomed in the suburbs, and cultural centers in Lone Tree, Parker, Lakewood and, soon, Longmont have become serious competitors. At those places, the parking is free.”

that welcomes all of Denver. That’s become a challenge in a city that’s increasingly young and nearer every year to a minority-majority population.

It’s not just that DPAC has traditionally catered to fans of Euro-centric art forms that are gradually losing appeal. It’s also that things have turned increasingly expensive in the area.

It would be inflammatory to say downtown has become the playground of the wealthy. There are still plenty of good burgers around, a free bus shuttle, a Gap. But it’s certainly fair to suggest things are headed in that direction. Consider: Rents for one-bedroom condos at the Spire high-rise across the street list for \$2,500 a month. Dinner entrées at the Oceanaire restaurant on the corner hover above \$30. Tickets are pricey and so is parking (and so are parking tickets).

Steadily, our downtown is transforming from a land of opportunity and accessibility — great concepts that defined what it means to live in the West; the reason so many of us moved here — to a place where new arrivals can hardly afford to live or play. Thanks to commercial and residential development, our downtown is safer, cleaner, healthier and decidedly more handsome, all things to celebrate. But it’s also become more exclusive.

Could a reimagined cultural plan — on the massive scale possible here — reverse the trend, or at least balance it? Could art lead the way to a more democratic Denver?

The need for DPAC to evolve into something more relevant to the 21st century is pressing. Art options have blossomed in the suburbs, and cultural centers in Lone Tree, Parker, Lakewood and, soon, Longmont have become serious competitors. At those places, the parking is free.

The fun part

Remaking the arts complex will mean hammering out some difficult technical and financial details but it's also a chance to indulge our imaginations. How will the making and consumption of art change over the next four decades? The possibilities seem endless, even if the dollars to pay for them are not.

There are basic requirements. Theaters will have to be reconfigured to accommodate both big ballets and small contemporary dance ensembles, chamber music and comedy shows. Diversity, in everything from programming to price, is key. The current setup, dominated by 2,500-seat venues, will need to give way to flexible spaces, fully ready to convey art in the digital age.

The formal and the casual will have to co-exist because demand will continue for both.

Denver Arts & Venues Executive Director Kent Rice talks up a giant outdoor screen that would allow opera to be enjoyed inside while picnickers watch a broadcast on a giant lawn next door.

There might be a small amphitheater that could host a touring mariachi band one night, a poetry slam the next.

But the thinking can go further, connecting Denverites, with their particular habits, to the arts in new ways. The complex, ex-

panded to include neighboring sites, would be sizable enough to weave in a hiking trail, volleyball or basketball courts, video games, swings, yoga studios, day-care, shopping of all sorts.

What if we really invested and came up with a plan that diminished Speer Boulevard as the great divide of downtown and built the orchestra hall on the Auraria Campus, connecting it to the Metro State College music school. What if we carved in a bike path that crossed a bridge over Champa Street and ended at a velodrome inside one of the convention center's large rooms? Bands could play in the middle.

The dreaming is more fun than the doing, of course. Any large idea will require compromise and deal-making to attract investment. A large, privately funded hotel over the Buell Theatre would do much to activate DPAC 24 hours a day, but government would have to relinquish control of its own property.

Still, the city controls real estate worth millions of dollars downtown and the chance to build tall over swank theaters would be attractive. We could take developers' money, especially if their swank new apartment buildings were architectural showpieces and they gave over their first floor for a black box theater. Entrepreneurs are more creative than bureaucrats: Let's get some good, profit-driven ideas on the table.

The key is to make deals in the public good. Not just in the interest of those who frequent the arts complex now, but those who might. Not just for those who can afford to hang out in a trendy downtown, but for anyone who wants to make the arts part of their life. The questions start with the arts, but they end in a more practical place, a city where everyone who lives here feels at home on every corner.

THE DENVER POST

May 18, 2014

TALL TALES OF THE WEST

At DAM, a look at how art shaped America's ideas
of the West – and not all truthfully.



BOLD LEDEIN. The Denver Art Museum's "The American West in Bronze" exhibit. The co-curators borrowed the pieces from 24 institutions and nine private collectors around the country. *AAron Ontiveroz, The Denver Post*

STORY 9

BY RAY MARK RINALDI

There's no arguing with bronze, really. As artistic materials go, it's sturdy and certain and — when sculpted with enough skill — capable of expressing itself with unwavering determination.

With a winning exuberance, too, as a visit to "The American West in Bronze 1850-1925" at the Denver Art Museum makes the case.

Each of the 72 objects in the exhibit tells its own tall tale about America's geographic second half. There are Indians on the hunt for buffalo, cowboys ripping across

the plains. Mighty panthers take down elk with their teeth and pioneers drive wagons into uncertain terrain.

Heroic, gory, sad and cinematic. It's easy to see how bronze captured the imagination of a country before its citizens began flocking to movie houses.

There was more to it than that, though, and "The American West in Bronze," co-curated by DAM and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, puts the story in order. The country's fetish for bronze figures in the

late 19th century helped its citizens understand who they were becoming during a period of great change.

The bronze statuettes that graced fireplace mantles from Boston to Chicago symbolized the prize that the newly settled West was for America. The country had tamed the feral “Buffalo and Wolves” that Edward Kemeys portrayed in his popular figure, first cast in 1878. It had vanquished “The Cheyenne” depicted by Frederic Remington in 1901 as a fierce and savage soldier, spear in hand, letting out a ferocious battle cry.

It found home-grown role models in the kind of “Buckaroo” Alexander Phimister Proctor dreamed up in 1914, and ancestral saints in Hermon Atkins MacNeil’s 1926 “Pioneer Woman,” with baby in one hand, ax in the other, pushing her family into the wild frontier.

The story these pieces told wasn’t entirely true, nor was it so dignified. The noble figures tended to play up the romance and omit the gritty realities. The range and the wagon trails were never so glamorous, and the cowboys and settlers so honored in bronze were taking part in the genocide of entire human populations, extinguishing animal species, destroying pristine lands.

You can see the regret forming as “The American West in Bronze” proceeds.

Cyrus Edwin Dallin’s “Appeal to the Great Spirit,” from 1916, depicting an Indian turning to prayer when all is lost, begs onlookers to feel guilty.

Henry Merwin Shrady’s majestic 1901 “Buffalo,” a singular bison imbued with a courtly, almost human, bearing, turns the hunt for hides into murder.

Bronze, pliable and strong like the settlers themselves, was uniquely qualified for this job, and unlike marble, its material competitor in sculpture, evoked the industrialization that was making the country even stronger. Sure, these pieces were generally cast in Europe, and the influence of classical sculpture is all over them, but the subjects were wholly American.

So were the artists themselves, like Proc-



Frederic Remington used the term “burning the air” to describe how he captured objects as if they were in motion. His “Cheyenne” warrior, from 1901, rides so hard, all four of his horse’s hooves are raised off the ground.

“

There is in the work, in its shaded patinas and superhuman craftsmanship, and in its romanticism, naturalism and outright lies, a sense of the West as we continue to construe it today, the past we celebrate, respect, reject and, ultimately, own.”

lections. They had a lot to choose from: bronzes are plentiful from the period, and the work was of high quality. Every single American sculptor of note during the exhibition’s 75-year period turned to Western subjects at some point, as Smith points out.

Still, their challenge was substantial. Unlike paintings, which are one of kind, bronze sculptures were cast in multiples. There might be 10 versions of a Charles M. Russell masterpiece, or a hundred, sometimes poured in several foundries. In addition to the nearly impossible task of determining provenance, the job required a delicate connoisseurship: Which iteration do you show?



Co-curators Thomas Brent Smith, above, and Thayer Tolles of New York's Met assembled the collection from a number of holdings. *Aaron Ontiveroz, The Denver Post*

On this question, the exhibit excels. The objects have an astonishingly high level of craft. In Denver, especially, where so many sentimental bronze eagles and cows fill our public squares, the achievement resonates.

When this show first went up at The Met this spring, it felt more artifact than art. That makes sense in some ways. There, among the pavement and skyscrapers, the statuettes of holstered cowboys and regal elk had the aura of imported goods.

That most of the work was made by artists in Massachusetts or Connecticut or Ohio — who were as likely to model their subjects on animals at the local zoo or on tourist excursions across the Mississippi as they were from real-life experience — did much to put the objects in their natural, unnatural habitat. The show was satisfying,

no doubt.

But the exhibit echoes differently in our part of the country, where early Western culture was fact and not fad. This show was “there” at the Met; at DAM, it is “here.” Even the shameful parts hold a deeper meaning. Explorer “Kit Carson,” rendered so carefully in 1907 by Frederick William MacMonnies, may have been a slaughterer of innocents, but he was our slaughterer.

There is in the work, in its shaded patinas and superhuman craftsmanship, and in its romanticism, naturalism and outright lies, a sense of the West as we continue to construe it today, the past we celebrate, respect, reject and, ultimately, own. Denver and New York may have collaborated on the exhibit, but it tells our story, and it makes for a remarkable moment at our museum.

THE DENVER POST

January 19, 2014

WOMEN FRONT AND CENTER

Two exhibits show how far female artists have come.



The exhibit “Transit of Venus” celebrates four decades of work by Front Range Women in the Visual Arts. Barbara Baer’s floor sculpture is in the foreground. *Ray Mark Rinaldi, The Denver Post*

STORY 10

BY RAY MARK RINALDI

At the risk of offending women — all women, in general; thinking women, in particular — let me say that “The Transit of Venus” is the girliest art exhibit I’ve ever seen in Colorado.

It’s not just a show of women’s art, it’s an audacious festival of middle-aged, menopausal, hippie chick affirmation. It made me wish I’d brought my yoga mat along to the RedLine gallery.

That’s not to say it’s frivolous. In fact, it’s feminist, serious, skilled and, at times, very good. The show features work from mem-

bers of Front Range Women in the Visual Arts, a group that banded together in 1974 to pop the balls of sexism that surrounded museums, galleries and academia back in the day. The movement was largely successful, and this show serves as a celebration.

And so it indulges in gal power, starting with the gallery’s entry wall, painted the prettiest, pastel pink curator William Biety could have dreamed up. That serves as an unapologetic warning to the visual references that follow.

And they do. From babydolls, ponies and

panties to quilting, meditating and makeup, and on to the doubled-edged imagery of Diet Cokes, flabby skin and food prep.

This isn't art about those things, necessarily, but it taps such symbols to make its points. Cumulatively, it's the rare exhibit that lets women be womanly, clichés and all.

The power of this excess is that it makes you look hard at the work, to see beyond those clichés.

In doing so, Barbara Takenaga's large-scale paintings go from giant tie-dyes replicated on linen to rich, acrylic abstractions. You look past the animal prints that catch your eye on Barbara Baer's three-dimensional floor works and grow to respect their references to Alexander Calder and Joan Miró.

You swallow the icky feeling that Margaretta Gilboy's oil of a couple kissing is about relationships and see it as deft, timeless and painterly; and you come to understand Virginia Maitland's floating acrylic color blocks not as soft and fluffy tissue paper, but as serious explorations of form and shape.

It's important to say that not all of this looking reaps the same rewards. As with every group show, the quality of individual pieces varies and the overall level isn't what you see at every RedLine display, but it feels important at every turn.

Companion show

Female artists actually get a better showcase at a corresponding exhibit being staged by the Sandra Phillips Gallery in the Golden Triangle.

Phillips, a trailblazer herself in Denver's commercial art scene, jumped at the chance to highlight some of her female artists as a complement to RedLine. Her small group offerings prove just how far women have come.

Phillips has exceptional paintings by Maitland, including a multicolored diptych titled "Bright Red" that drapes together blues and blacks with one streak of crimson slivered down its middle.

Other highlights include Virginia Folkestad's 3-D constructions of mesh and thread that resemble flowers, Ania Gola-Kumor's small, mixed-media collages and Irene Delka McCray's swirling, surreal scenes in oil.

This work has its feminine traits, too. It's full of creamy lines and craft-making allusions. But here's the thing: It sells for serious money and brings home the fact that women don't have to mimic the work of men to have careers.

It wasn't always that way. Four decades ago, when Front Range Women in the Visual Arts formed, women couldn't get a break from curators or colleges. The group's strategy was to be visible and mentor each other and the generations that followed. Their radicalism amounted to putting on shows.

People still argue about the role of women in art, but female artists now have solid places on the schedules of the Denver Art Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver and other institutions, on the faculties of the region's art schools, in local galleries (though, room for improvement remains there).

They can succeed by making whatever kind of art they want: huge constructions of steel and concrete or delicate paintings set in kitchens. They can reference blood or butterflies.

At the risk of offending men, let me say that testosterone can be a barrier to rendering such intimacy. I see a lot of art by men, and it steers suspiciously clear of the human figure while professing to examine humanity. It leans toward social commentary and away from self-exploration. It can be distant, rely too heavily on technology and need too much explanation. Sorry, dudes.

Of course, women fall short, too. But failing means there is a chance to succeed in the first place, and that opportunity wasn't always there. Some women, somewhere along the line, had to claim it. These chicks at RedLine were the ones who did.

THE DENVER POST

August 3, 2014

THE PURSUIT IN KEEPING IT FRESH

STORY 10

BY RAY MARK RINALDI

Opera companies — the important ones, anyway — feel tremendous pressure to produce new work, despite the indifference of most patrons who are just as happy to hear their 10,000th “Tosca” as they are anything original.

But artists, and the general directors who enable them, don’t want to think of themselves as working in a form whose best days are behind it. They’re desperate to stay relevant and mark their own age by adding to the canon.

It’s the best kind of discontentment, truly, because it leads to all levels of experimentation. New operas are troublesome, expensive, risky and usually bad, so there’s real incentive to make things interesting enough to warrant international attention.

All that is to explain how two of the quirkiest productions in a long while could end up on the Santa Fe Opera stage this same summer. They’re both novelties and both succeed in shaking up, in a good way, the classical music business.

“Dr. Sun Yat-sen” is the American premiere of composer Huang Ruo’s intimate take on the epic rise of China’s great, 20th-century revolutionary. The piece is sung in Mandarin, which is rare and intriguing, and it taps both Eastern and Western culture to make something that feels entirely fresh and winning in the New Mexico desert.

The season’s “Double Bill” is less exotic, but more off-the-wall. It combines Mozart’s



Brenda Rae in “The Impresario” at the Santa Fe Opera. *Provided by the Santa Fe Opera.*

1786, one-act comedy “The Impresario” and Stravinsky’s 1914, one-act drama “Le Rossignol” into one interwoven night at the opera. It’s a long stretch from Amadeus to Igor, and it feels that way in the theater, but the result is amiable and entertaining and its essential love for art wins you over.

Director Michael Gieleta went out on a limb for this one, especially “The Impresario,” a zany singspiel (partly spoken and sung) about dueling divas vying to be cast in a work staged by a producer on the verge of bankruptcy. The original was full of in

jokes about 18th-century theater and had the actors auditioning for a play by reciting long monologues.

That wouldn't fit so well in 2014, so Gioleta brought in librettist/playwright Ranjit Bolt to update the dialogue with a lot of in jokes about 21st-century opera. There's an overload of references to those composers and titles opera patrons have seen countless times, right up to several barbs about Santa Fe Opera's own production of "The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein" just last year.

Instead of the monologues, Gioleta dug up rarely heard concert arias by Mozart and subbed them in as the audition pieces. It's a clever way of getting around one of opera's golden rules: Don't mess with Mozart.

And in a bold (probably too bold) move, he turned the plot so that the sopranos are vying for roles in "Le Rossignol," which, of course, begins in earnest after intermission with a very straight and powerful take on the original.

"Le Rossignol" — in English "The Nightingale" — is a somber delight, powered by soprano Erin Morley, who sings the part of the feathered creature who enchants, and teaches life lessons to, a long-ago Chinese emperor. Her soprano is sweet, and not at all bird-like. It resonates with human depth and emotional clarity and exploits with richness all of Stravinsky's sharp and dissonant moments.

The two operas are like night and day and Gioleta doesn't always see so clearly in the dusk. "The Impresario," with all its talk and mugging performers, is too much musical theater for an opera venue. He went further than he might have making the thing so current and connecting it to "Le Rossignol." There's a shortage of serious singing.

But there are moments of intoxicating innovation in the mashup as well. Gioleta cleverly and economically uses the opera's overture time to set his stages. Actors take their places and begin to develop their characters silently while conductor Kenneth Montgomery's orchestra plays its intros.

“

That's part of the experiment with making new work — or making work new. What do you present, and how do you do it with dignity? Are Caucasian actors in Asian hair and makeup a form of old-school blackface?"

One opera gives away gracefully to the other as "The Impresario's" show-biz office is transformed into a Chinese wilderness. As audiences watch, walls come down, trees come out, the same actors who played furred and flamboyant divas are stripped and fitted with robes for roles as Chinese courtesans. Scenery designer James Macnamera, costumer Fabio Toblini and lighting designer Christopher Akerlind work magic.

"Dr. Sun Yat-sen" has its wow factor as well, though sets are just a part of it. Huang Ruo's score soars with urgency and pulses with repetition. The music is driven by percussion and expressed through instruments traditional to both Europe and Asia, which conductor Carolyn Kuan manages to balance well.

Vocal lines float patiently above the fray and they are wholly true to the nature of Mandarin as it is both spoken and sung. Notes collapse at the end of words and phrases instead of rising as they do in Italian or French.

That helps to keep attention on a story that isn't always compelling. Huang and librettist Candace Mui-ngam Chong humanize Sun Yat-sen's story by making the overthrow of corrupt imperialists nearly a backdrop to the story of his courtship and marriage to his second wife and comrade in arms, Soong Ching-ling. The pair hook up while the man is still married and the great hero's character is allowed its flaws.



Xiaoxiao Wang performs a dance in the Santa Fe Opera's production of "Le Rossignol." Provided by the Photo by Ken Howard, Santa Fe Opera

But the joys and pains flash by in broad strokes and ordinary (translated) dialogue. Passion is in short supply and that makes for a long night that might have passed more quickly with a few potent battle scenes.

"Dr. Sun Yat-sen" has a difficult past. It was supposed to premiere in Beijing in 2011, but government officials pulled the plug at the last minute and the opener took place in Hong Kong. Watching through American eyes, it's hard to see the reasoning. Is it the founding father's humanity that made officials nervous? Some sense that government corruption is an inescapable part of the Chinese political personality? Neither seem offensive, so the mystery remains.

The Santa Fe production had its difficulties, too. Just a few weeks before opening, lead tenor Warren Mok, who created the role, left town amid wide suspicion that he wasn't cutting it vocally. Director James Robinson, a top creator of new work in the U.S., had one of those delicate opera-world situations on his hands.

Joseph Dennis, a second-year appren-

tice at the Santa Fe Opera, stepped in and brought ample stature to the part, not easy considering the women here get the better arias (first wife Rebecca Witty and second wife Corinne Winters, and both were impressive). They all plunged into the Mandarin with confidence and skill, though, not surprisingly, it did sound more natural coming from the actual Chinese singers in the show (Gong Dong-Jian and Chen Ye Yuan).

That's part of the experiment with making new work — or making work new. What do you present, and how do you do it with dignity? Are Caucasian actors in Asian hair and makeup a form of old-school black-face? Or is it new-school color-blind casting? How far can you push a bit of Mozart, even if his work actually could use some improvement?

These sorts of questions don't come up with "Tosca," and they are answered incorrectly as often as they are innovatively. Santa Fe never seems to fear the possibility of failure. And, season after season, its successes go far in keeping the art form vibrant.

THE DENVER POST

October 26, 2014

THE EVO OF DEVO

The MCA takes a chance with a retrospective of musician Mark Mothersbaugh's artistic career.



Artist and musician Mark Mothersbaugh in front of a series of rugs he adapted from the more than 30,000 postcards he has drawn during his lifetime. The exhibit "Myopia," at the MCA Denver, traces his career in the band Devo and as a writer, inventor, filmmaker and more. *Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post*

STORY 10

BY RAY MARK RINALDI

Nothing makes art more exciting than genuine risk, when an exhibit has the potential to succeed wildly or fail miserably, sail careers or stall, when someone gathers the nerve to show something authentically different and the rest of us feel free to gush or guffaw.

Risk is all over "Myopia," the mega-retrospective of art by Mark Mothersbaugh opening at the MCA Denver this week. Mothersbaugh is a full-blown pop star, a co-founder of Devo, the legendary oddball post-punk band that scored big with "Whip It" in 1980. He's rich and famous and peo-

ple still line up for his autograph.

What he isn't — no small detail — is a member of the fine-art fraternity, the compact cadre of players, usually hand-picked in their youth, who show in the country's chain of contemporary art museums and high-priced galleries in New York.

It's a close club and hard to get in, especially for musicians, movie stars and politicians who dabble in paint or clay. The critics are just waiting, and they should be, to annihilate the fakes.

Mothersbaugh is no dabbler. He's been drawing, painting, copying, invent-

ing, filming, designing, photographing for five decades. His art is holistic: The music (brilliant), is connected to his videos (groundbreaking), the sketches (endlessly entertaining), transform into his prints, rugs, sculptures, installations and zany inventions all of them likable, challenging and fully creative.

Still, you never know. “Myopia” is a massive, expensive show, filling all three floors of the MCA. It could come off as a great discovery or an embarrassing exercise in celebrity excess. The stakes are high, both for Mothersbaugh and curator Adam Lerner, who connected the dots on Mothersbaugh’s lifetime of work and chanced his own reputation by talking five important museums into booking it, sight unseen, after its Denver debut.

Success could mean a new level of respect for the pair, a score for Lerner in a competitive business and a completion of his legacy for Mothersbaugh in his 65th year, allowing him to command big money for work, perhaps enter the collections of important museums.

Failure would be a drag.

Making of an artist

Mark Mothersbaugh was raised on the boredom of Akron, Ohio, and ruined by the killings at Kent State. He spent the first seven years of his life almost blind, in a world of his own, until he was diagnosed with myopia and fitted with eyeglasses.

He learned to be a confident and creative kid in a climate of low expectations and stayed that way into adulthood, emerging as an artist with a social conscience. He marched against the Vietnam War.

He was enrolled at Kent State in 1970 when soldiers opened fire on protesters and out of that troubled, seminal moment, fine-tuned a take on the world that accounted for a mutated human race, a theory of de-evolution.

His band, Devo, wrote songs and made crude movies to go along with them — some of the first music videos. Mothersbaugh used whatever media he could find

“

Comparisons to da Vinci are nice, but they push the stakes on “Myopia” way up, perhaps too high. For sure, the exhibit is likable. There’s something for everyone, Devo fanatics, fine-art snobs and anybody imaginative enough to see the art of an instrument made from 100 birdcalls.”

to express himself — postcards, mail art, rubber stamps. His group pasted decals around town. There was a bit of today’s skateboard culture in all of it.

And the remnants of Beat culture, as well. Mothersbaugh was a frantic writer, at one point self-publishing a book 300 pages long, filled with absurd drawings and text.

Devo honed a new kind of sound, fast and unpolished, with edgy songs like “Mongoloid,” and a cover of the Rolling Stones’ “Satisfaction.” They weren’t angry punks, but there was darkness to their scope, a canny, campy suspicion of the status quo. “We kind of felt like we were musical reporters back then,” Mothersbaugh said earlier this month. “Like we were art reporters and using our art to talk about culture.”

Devo’s music offered an off-beat complement to the punk-rock scene that defined the cultural edge.

“It was antithetical to trying to be or whatever the 1970s version of ‘American Idol’ was,” said Mothersbaugh.

“People were expressing some internal rage, some internal energy and ideals that surpassed what was currently happening.”

Devo began getting gigs far and wide. Record companies discovered them, and fame followed. Commercially, it peaked with “Whip It.” Promo shots, with the guys in yellow hazmat suits and stacked, red

caps, are rock 'n' roll history.

Fans waned, but Mothersbaugh went on. In 1986, pal Paul Reubens asked him to score a new TV show he was doing. In just a few days, Mothersbaugh had written the music for “Pee-Wee’s Playhouse.”

That’s been a second career. He’s scored more than 100 films and TV shows since.

These days, he is headquartered in a building on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles called Mututo Musika. It’s a quirky space, a round building, painted lime green, on a strip of expensive designer boutiques. His recording studio is in the middle with offices spoking out at the sides. Things hang about: guitars, keyboards of all sorts, toys, the ceramic Roli Poli objects he recently finished.

This is where he works, writes music, makes art and continues to draw on postcards. He now has 30,000 of them, sketches of humanoid figures, somewhere between man, Martian and mutant, mysterious machinery, animals without heads and eyeballs without faces, apes, soldiers, tanks, astronauts and cartoon figures of every kind; the stuff that falls naturally from its creator’s head.

“Myopia” attempts to tell his whole story, the birth of Mothersbaugh’s ideas, their manifestation into words, music, art. “In many ways, Mark Mothersbaugh himself is the work of art,” said Lerner. “Art is not about what you make, it’s about how you live.”

An unexpected show

Adam Lerner met Mark Mothersbaugh when Devo was in town for a concert in July of 2011. Lerner, whose title is chief animator at the MCA, was assembling an exhibit of work by seminal punk-scene photographer Bruce Conner. Interviewing the Devo co-founder was research.

“I had listened to Devo as a kid, “ said Lerner. “ But honestly, I didn’t know who Mark Mothersbaugh was before I arranged the interview.”

They met at the MCA, where a polite opening question about Mothersbaugh’s own visual art output changed the whole

conversation.

“Within 15 minutes, I realized that he’s a guy I ought to be paying attention to,” said Lerner.

Mothersbaugh had his own epiphany.

“I went to the museum, and the museum was young and beautiful, the director was articulate and energetic,” he said. “I liked it.”

Mothersbaugh had been showing some of his prints, basically blowups of his postcards printed at home, and selling them for ‘a few hundred bucks’ at small galleries. But he was hardly scratching the surface of the fine-art world.

Lerner suggested they explore something bigger, perhaps a museum exhibit. “He talked about doing this show, and I was, like, ‘Man, this is a dream come true.’”

The project morphed along the way. At first, it was to focus on Mothersbaugh’s recent output, colorful, three-dimensional pieces that would fit well into a museum, larger-than-life replicas of the My Little Pony toy, a car — an actual car — that was fashioned from the back ends of two cars. These works open and close “Myopia.”

But the closer Lerner got, the more he realized it was Mothersbaugh’s body of work, culled over a lifetime, that was the heart of his art. There were patterns in the work that needed to be melded together, his attraction to mirrored images, his flow between dark themes and light, his balance of fine artmaking and commercial endeavors.

A simple show turned into a thousand-piece retrospective. Mothersbaugh’s work had to be identified, found, sorted, assembled. There were boxes to empty, notebooks to scour, videos to watch. The tale had to be told in tearsheets and scribblings, grainy videos — not the stuff of contemporary art museums.

“At first I wondered how it would be read by the art world,” Lerner said. “But now I feel it is a giant criticism of the art world.”

By that he means: Why hadn’t the art world discovered Mothersbaugh earlier? Was it his rock ‘n’ roll background, the dabbler factor? Was it curators’ fixations on easy-to-read objects, sellable objects, that caused



Mothersbaugh has been a pioneer in music videos, but also a prolific composer of film and television scores. The exhibit curated by MCA Denver's Adam Lerner tells his life story through thousands of objects. *Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post*

them to overlook Mothersbaugh — and artists like him? Probably all of the above.

In the end, both Lerner and Mothersbaugh think the neglect was in the best interest of creativity that no dealer got hold of Mothersbaugh prevented him from becoming a commodity.

"The uber private part of it, the incredibly private part of it, made it easy for me to work in any style I wanted," Mothersbaugh said. "It made it easy for me to go super low or go high. I could spend a week on one drawing if I wanted to or I could do 10 of them in one hour."

Still, the exhibit needs to prove its mettle. Lerner has forged a solid reputation in the museum community for academic rigor. The MCA has backed into the late 20th century before, most notably with "West of Center," an exploration of 1970s counter-culture that was fun — and placed firmly into a larger cultural context.

He is applying the same standards to "Myopia," and that has helped it get bookings at places like the Grey Art Gallery at New York University and the Contempo-

rary Arts Center at the Cincinnati Art Museum. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, an encyclopedic institution with 80,000 objects, will show "Myopia" concurrently with an exhibition focused on Leonardo da Vinci's codices.

"We believe that Mark Mothersbaugh's endless curiosity about the world is not unlike that of Leonardo and other great artists: they all share a drive to observe, understand, and create," said Minneapolis Institute of Arts director Kaywin Feldman.

Comparisons to da Vinci are nice, but they push the stakes on "Myopia" way up, perhaps too high. For sure, the exhibit is likable. There's something for everyone, Devo fanatics, fine-art snobs and anybody imaginative enough to see the art of an instrument made from 100 birdcalls.

But the comprehensiveness is part of the risk. On their own the pieces can be schlocky, immature, "super low," in the artist's words. As a whole, they expose a rare brilliance, piecing together the story of not just art, but an artful life, lived to the fullest.