

Denver: Art Capital of the Rockies

By MATTHIAS ANDERSON



Renowned for its “mile high” altitude, Denver is the capital of both Colorado and its region, with a seven-county metropolitan area encompassing 2.4 million residents. Situated where the Great Plains meet the Rocky Mountains, Denver on a clear day affords breathtaking views of nearly 200 peaks, and the locals enjoy their 300 days of sunshine per year by heading west to hike and ski.

Although Denver is often associated with the Old West, its highly educated residents are remarkably forward-looking. Their chief spokesperson is Mayor John Hickenlooper (in office since 2003), who sees the arts and preservation communities as partners in making the city’s long-deserted center hum again. Today you can find almost 300 public works of art scattered across the city, and even the airport features 26 site-specific works. Most impressive, however, is the electorate’s reauthorizations of a sales tax (one penny on every \$10) that benefits the area’s nonprofit cultural and scientific organizations. In 2006, this support totaled a very helpful \$38 million.

Complementing the healthy nonprofit scene are half a dozen gallery districts containing more than 120 commercial galleries (although this count is dropping somewhat as the recession hits home). In addition to regular hours, most galleries open their doors the first Friday evening of every month to create a more festive atmosphere.

THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE

The most prestigious of these art districts is the Golden Triangle (defined by three avenues), home to the **Denver Art Museum**, the largest art museum between Chicago and California. DAM has long been admired for its holdings of American Indian, Spanish Colonial, and Pre-Columbian artworks, and now its modern and contemporary collections also rate highly thanks to the Vail collector-donors Kent

ALLEN TRUE (1881-1955)

THE TRAPPERS

1911, OIL ON CANVAS, 16 X 52 1/2 IN.

COLLECTION JAN AND FREDERICK MAYER, ON LOAN TO THE DENVER ART MUSEUM

and Vicki Logan. In 2006, DAM made headlines worldwide when it opened an enormous, zigzagging building designed by the “starchitect” Daniel Libeskind and named after donor-trustee Frederic C. Hamilton. Seemingly in the process of exploding between the museum’s 1971 building — a 24-sided “castle” by Italian modernist Gio Ponti — and the Denver Public Library’s postmodernist addition by American Michael Graves (1995), the Hamilton Building powerfully underscores Denver’s taste for the new and daring.

The difficulty of hanging “regular” art on Libeskind’s angled walls has stirred controversy since opening day, so this season the DAM has organized its own aesthetic rebuttal. On view November 14-March 28, the exhibition *Embrace!* reveals how 18 invited artists addressed this physical challenge, empowering their paintings to leave the wall and “embrace the space.”

Yet DAM has not forgotten those who prefer their paintings in frames. Founded in 2001, DAM’s Petrie Institute of Western American Art is truly a center of excellence for this booming field. Launched by the donation of more than 700 objects from Dorothy and Bill Harmsen Sr., the Institute was renamed in 2007 in recognition of Tom and Jane Petrie’s donation of \$5 million and long-time commitment. The Institute also draws encouragement from the billionaire businessman Philip Anschutz, who owns the world’s largest collection of Western art and sits on the museum’s board.

On view this season are two important Western projects, one obvious, the other groundbreaking. The first is a survey of the charismatic

THE DENVER ART MUSEUM'S 2006 BUILDING BY DANIEL LIBESKIND, WITH GIO PONTI'S 1971 BUILDING AT FAR LEFT. PHOTO: JEFF GOLDBERG/ESTO

Charles M. Russell (1864-1926), featuring more than 60 major paintings and sculptures from public and private collections. This retrospective runs at DAM October 17-January 10, 2010, and then travels to Tulsa's Gilcrease Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. More intriguing is a show that will revive the reputation of Allen True (1881-1955), Colorado's most famous artist a century ago. True's easel-size oil paintings (inspired by the Taos School and his own backpack trips) will grace DAM, while the Denver Public Library will feature the lively illustrations he made under the Brandywine Valley master Howard Pyle. Nearby, the Colorado Historical Society will consider True's murals. On view October 2-March 28, 2010, the exhibition is complemented by such programs as a bus tour of mural sites on November 14, a self-guided walking tour of relevant sites downtown, and a new documentary on Colorado Public Television. After it closes here, *Allen True's West* will visit other western museums through 2013.

Another unexpected delight at DAM is the private collection of British art begun in 1996 by the late William M. B. Berger and his wife Bernadette. Now displayed at DAM on a rotating basis, this comprises roughly 200 objects spanning seven centuries, with particular strength in medieval and Renaissance material seldom seen anywhere in the U.S. Among the Bergers' crowd-pleasers are paintings by Holbein (see this magazine's cover), Gainsborough, Constable, Munnings, and Hodgkin.

Still another idiosyncratic collection can be enjoyed nearby at the **Kirkland Museum of Fine & Decorative Art**. Opened in 2003, it is literally packed with a 3,300-piece collection of 20th-century decorative arts and 700 works by Colorado artists. (The space is so tight that children under 13 are not admitted.) Particular attention is paid to the museum's namesake, Vance Kirkland (1904-1981), a painter who once headed the University of Denver's art school and evolved stylistically from realism to abstraction. On view this season is the exhibition *Streams of Modernism* (September 25-January 3), which uses the Kirkland's rich collection to show how such designers as Charles and Ray Eames, Eero Saarinen, and Florence Knoll influenced each other. On the weekend of September 11-13, those interested in American decorative arts c. 1900 can register for an intensive seminar.

Sometime next year, the Golden Triangle will be enhanced by the **Clyfford Still Museum**, a large, concrete structure being built by architecture-world darling Brad Cloepfil. In the 1950s, the pioneering Abstract Expressionist painter Clyfford Still (1904-1980) fled the mainstream art world and began representing himself. Few of his pictures entered the market thereafter, which is why approximately 94 percent of his output (825 paintings and 1,575 works on paper) can now be found in the tidy Maryland warehouse supervised by his estate. Still's will stipulated that this trove be given "to an American city that will ... maintain permanent quarters exclusively for the collection." In 2004, Mayor Hickenlooper secured the collection for Denver, an appropriate move not only because the museum will draw cultural tourists, but also because Denver had its own Abstract Expressionist scene.



As for art made today, DAM is well complemented by the **Museum of Contemporary Art/Denver**. Founded in 1996, this institution moved to a new level in 2007 upon opening its glowing glass-box building, designed by the fashionable Tanzanian-British architect David Adjaye. Given Denver's AbEx history, it makes sense that MCA/D is presenting the colorful "Flood" paintings of Philadelphian Barnaby Furnas (b. 1973); his solo show is on view September 25-January 3. Although it is open only three days per week, try visiting the **Dikeou Collection**, another space for cutting-edge art downtown. Opened in 2003, this is the private collection of the Denver-born, New York-based artist Devon Dikeou.

Elsewhere in the Golden Triangle, art lovers can enjoy 23 different galleries and artists' studios. Among the standouts are **Gallery 1261**, which features the luminous paintings of Denver's own Quang Ho from October 30 through November 30, **William Havu Gallery**, and **Walker Fine Art**. As you stroll, be sure to admire the numerous sculptures commissioned to enliven the neighborhood, especially the dynamic metal pieces of local sculptor **Kevin Robb** on Acoma at the corners of 8th and 9th Streets.

GALLERY-GOING

Next, explore the historic warehouses of **Lower Downtown** ("LoDo"). Once the city's leading gallery district, LoDo changed in 1995 when Coors Field opened for ball games, attracting suburbanites in search of entertainment venues. Many galleries shifted to the city's oldest Latino neighborhood along Santa Fe Drive (see below), but now some are floating back. In LoDo you will find **Robischon Gallery**, which presents blue-chip contemporary art by such stars as Ross Bleckner and Ann Hamilton, while new local work is at **Translations Gallery** and the **Center for Visual Art**, the off-campus gallery of the Metropolitan State College of Denver. In a totally different vein are the well-made Western paintings and drawings at **David Cook Fine Art**, and the superb watercolors of working cowboys at **William Matthews Gallery**. Once back in your car, drive east on Colfax to see **Abend Gallery**, which is presenting the Russian surrealists Aleksey and Olga Ivanov September 18-October 11, followed by the group show *Form and Figure* featuring Deborah Bays, Dan Beck, Ernie Gal-

legos, Ramon Kelley, Robert Spooner, and Zhaoming Wu (October 16-November 8). Fortunately, the Santa Fe art district south of downtown is still thriving. A key player is the **Museo de las Americas**, now highlighting five Latino artists who utilize popular cultural artifacts to create grand visual statements (September 10-January 11, 2010). Nearby is the **Van Straaten Gallery**, which offers a wide range of prints, including those published by its sister company, Riverhouse Editions.

A CROWDED CALENDAR

Art events occur all year long in Denver, but this season offers particularly good ones. The third annual **Denver Plein Air Arts Festival** kicks off on First Friday, September 4, at galleries around the Golden

And looking toward next year, jot “July 3-5” in your datebook for the 20th annual **Cherry Creek Arts Festival**, the free celebration of the visual, culinary, and performing arts that draws 350,000 visitors over three days. Also on the horizon for next summer is the **Denver Biennial of the Americas**, a citywide project devoted to sustainability, innovation, and entrepreneurship. Subtitled “In Good We Trust,” this jamboree is directed by the visionary designer Bruce Mau, who was inspired by the glow that overtook Denver last summer during the Democratic National Convention.

That glow lives on every day in Denver’s art world. Come see why.

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A TYPICAL STREET IN LoDO

Triangle. Participating painters will be working at the State Capitol and 16th Street Mall September 5-16, and an exhibition of what they made will appear at the Denver Public Library November 7-December 31. Those wanting to see the results of this summer’s **Estes Park Plein Air Painting the Parks** should make the 50-mile drive to scenic Estes Park; the exhibition/sale continues there through September 30.

Saks Galleries, a leading gallery located in Denver’s Cherry Creek neighborhood, normally offers American, European, Western, and American Indian arts dating from the 19th century through our own time. From October 24 through December 1, Saks plays host to a trio of shows organized by the **American Impressionist Society**: its tenth annual *National Juried Exhibition*, approximately 100 paintings by its 11 Master Artists, and a juried selection from its Signature and Associate members. Master Artist (and juror) Quang Ho offers a painting demonstration on October 24. (While in Cherry Creek, stop by the **Art Students League of Denver**, where talented faculty members such as Ho teach more than 600 students per month.)

Denver’s 150th birthday is the focal point of this year’s **Denver Arts Week** (November 6-14), and its final day coincides with the 2009 edition of *Salon du Musée*. This year arts impresario Natalie Rekstad-Lynn has partnered with the Denver Art Museum to invite the 18 artists of *Embrace!* (see above) to donate 18 works for her popular soirée and sale. (Net proceeds benefit the museum.)

Directory of Resources (in alphabetical order)

All listings are in Denver and area code 303, unless noted otherwise.

- **Abend Gallery**, 2260 E. Colfax Avenue, 80206, 355.0950, abendgallery.com
- **Art Students League of Denver**, 200 Grant Street, 80203, 778.6990, asld.org
- **Center for Visual Art**, Metro State, 1734 Wazee Street, 80202, 294.5207, metrostatecva.org
- **Cherry Creek Arts Festival**, 355.2787, cherryarts.org
- **D Gallery**, 3558 Navajo Street, 80211, 520.8065, dgallerydenver.com
- **David Cook Fine Art**, 1637 Wazee Street, 80202, 623.8181, davidcookfineart.com
- **Denver Art Museum**, 100 West 14th Avenue Parkway, 80204, 720.865.5000, denverartmuseum.org
- **Denver Plein Air Arts Festival**, denverpleinair.com
- **Dikeou Collection**, 1615 California Street, Suite 515, 80202, 623.3001, dikeoucollection.org
- **Estes Park Plein Air**, 423 W. Elkhorn Avenue, Estes Park, CO 80517, 970.586.9203, estesarts.com
- **Gallery 1261**, 1261 Delaware, 80204, 571.1261, gallery1261.com
- **Kevin Robb Studios**, 7001 West 35th Avenue, Wheat Ridge, CO 80033, 431.4758, kevinrobb.com
- **Kirkland Museum of Fine & Decorative Art**, 1311 Pearl Street, 80203, 832.8576, kirklandmuseum.org
- **Museo de las Americas**, 861 Santa Fe Drive, 80204, 571.4401, museo.org
- **Museum of Contemporary Art/Denver**, 1485 Delgany Street, 80202, 298.7554, mcadenver.org
- **Robischon Gallery**, 1740 Wazee Street, 80202, 298.7788, robischongallery.com
- **Saks Galleries**, 3019 East Second Avenue, 80206, 333.4411, saksgalleries.com
- **Salon du Musée**, 327 Majestic View Drive, Boulder, CO 80303, 494.0180, salon-d-arts.org
- **Susan Bell Fine Art**, 1573 S. Pearl Street, 80210, 282.7343, susanbellfinerart.com
- **Translations Gallery**, 1743 Wazee Street, 80202, 629.0713, translationsgallery.com
- **Van Straaten Gallery**, 760 Santa Fe Drive, 80204, 573.8585, vanstraatengallery.com
- **Walker Fine Art**, 300 West 11th Avenue, #A, 80204, 355.8955, walkerfineart.com
- **William Havu Gallery**, 1040 Cherokee Street, 80204, 893.2360, williamhavugallery.com
- **William Matthews Gallery**, 1617 Wazee Street, 80202, 534.1300, williammatthewsgallery.com