



Contemplating Closure of an Art Museum

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by Pat Rogers

There was no fanfare, ceremony or final farewell when the Parrish Museum closed its doors on Sept 4, 2012. Just the quiet turning of a key behind wrought iron gates. This simple motion signified the museum's time of holding exhibitions in Southampton was over. There was no sudden up-tick in visitors at the end. With so much to look forward to, it's no wonder this chapter ended with a whisper.

In November, the metaphorical brass bands and celebratory parades will ring out to welcome the museum's new building and march into the future. The sleek new building is bound to be a wonder. Much art will be presented, enjoyed, wondered about, argued over and puzzled through in the times to come. At its core, the arrival of the new building is a triumph for art in the Hamptons. In these tough economic times, it's almost a miracle that the philanthropic and financial commitment to art did not waver and the project is nearing completion.

Still, as the current chapter closed, I couldn't help but consider a few of my pivotal moments viewing art in the building on Jobs Lane. I grew up visiting the major museums in New York City on field trips and day trips. The usual suspects—the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim—formed my idea of what an art museum was: endless rooms of art on multiple floors, hushed voices, velvet ropes, long lines, marble floors, wings of static art collections. The overseas museums I visited as a teenager didn't alter my narrow vision of what I believed art museums were. It's fair to say that all were located in cities.

I visited the Parrish for the first time sometime in the early '90s after moving to the Hamptons. I wasn't an arts writer then, or even a reporter. In the absence of a floor plan in a brochure, I remember swiftly walking through the three galleries to get a feel for the museum's scope. Standing in the back gallery, I thought: "Is this it?" Checking my urban snobby side, I returned to the front of the museum to settle in and look at the art. What I saw over the years didn't fall flat.

Wandering through the historic building constructed to house Renaissance art collected by Samuel Parrish, the beginnings of a love for Contemporary art was born. On reflection, it makes perfect sense. The original point of the Parrish Art Museum was to provide a place for art from the greater world that could help broaden the artistic experience for the inhabitants of the seaside village. Through diverse shows, Contemporary art from across America made guest appearances.

My first true engagement with an art installation was "Donald Lipski: The Cauldron." (May 12 to July 14, 1996). I spent much time walking around the outstretched charred branches that spanned 50 feet. The pair of scorched trees were found in the aftermath of the Pine Barrens fires in Westhampton, NY. They were now connected to a series of technical contraptions that conjured the lab of a neat (or minimalist) mad scientist.

I delved into the compulsion collectors feel in “Finders Keepers: The Obsessions of Passionate Collectors” (Oct 30 to Dec 31, 2005). The exhibition was the subject of the first story that I wrote about a Parrish exhibition. Agathe Snow’s “The Sand Bank” introduced me to participatory art. The conceptual piece was part of “Sand: Memory, Meaning, and Metaphor” (June 29 to Sept 14, 2008). Before meeting Snow, I didn’t realize how many people gathered on the Lower East Side, Staten Island and other NYC spots for participatory art happenings.

“Damaged Romanticism: A Mirror of Modern Emotion” brought an international roster of contemporary artists to Southampton (February 8-April 12, 2009). The narrative show reminded me of a visual collection of short stories if Shirley Jackson, Richard Price and Junot Diaz had become visual artists instead of writers. The show was powerful, provocative and unmincing. It also allowed me to see art by Sophie Calle for the first time. I had just “discovered” the French artist through her book “Exquisite pain” spied in the gift shop of Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MoCA).

On Jobs Lane, I discovered exhibition selections could be heated among artists during “Mixed Greens: Artists Choose Artists on the East End (April 19 – June 21, 2009). I realized then the role museums can play as places to engage and build community.

In rewinding my memories, it’s the art and my engagement with it that reverberates—not necessarily the building. Still, the down-to-earth setting allowed for comfortable exploration. The simple surroundings seemed to grant permission to “not know” an artist, a body of work or a type of art before walking in the door. Without any perceived admonition or expectation, discovering art was a natural and relaxed experience.

I will miss the brick entrance, the curved gates mirroring each other, the homey feel of the side yard and the walkway leading past the dignified rows of white statuary. I enjoyed walking along the sidewalks of Southampton Village, popping into the Parrish and then heading out for the evening on foot.

That said, the future beckons. What’s not to love about art presented in a state-of-the art building? I can’t wait to see what happens.

BASIC FACTS: The Parrish Art Museum is relocating from Southampton to Water Mill, NY in November 2012. This is the first time the museum is moving. The Parrish opened in 1897. Its first entrance led from Main Street, Southampton, NY. The Jobs Lane entrance opened in 1914 after an addition reoriented the museum.

Pat Rogers has been writing about art since 1997.

NOTE: The featured photo appearing on the Home Page portrays the building after the museum vacated the Jobs Lane location in September.

Want to know what’s happening in the Hamptons art community? How about the North Fork or NYC? Visit HamptonsArtHub.com to find out.

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