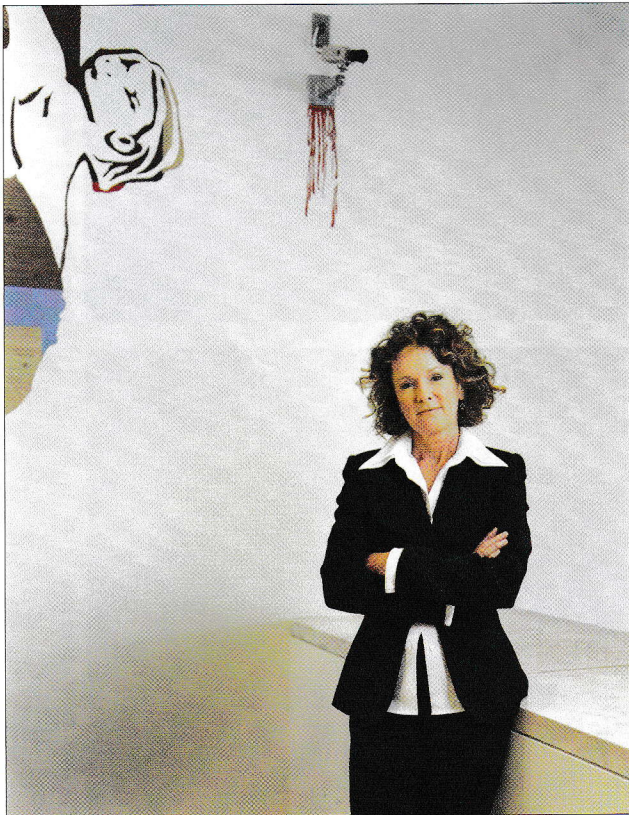


# Thinking Big at a Small Museum

Under Ann Philbin's leadership, the Hammer Museum is growing in many directions

BY HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP



Ann Philbin has showcased more than 40 emerging artists in the Hammer Project series, including Santiago Cucullu, who created the installation *Hammer Project* (detail) for his exhibition in 2004–5.

**B**efore she was a museum director, Ann Philbin was an artist. Although she never sold or exhibited the drawings and watercolor landscapes she produced, she says that this early experience has given her a special empathy with emerging artists.

Philbin, whose winning smile, tousled brown hair, and easy laugh make her seem much younger than her 53 years, calls her approach to running the Hammer Museum “artist-centric.” In her seven years at the Los Angeles institution, she has given up-

and-coming artists solo shows, introduced a full calendar of events, and organized award-winning contemporary exhibitions. In the process, she has transformed what began as a staid showcase for oil magnate Armand Hammer’s private collection into one of the country’s premier venues for contemporary art.

“Ann has brought an average, midsized museum to national prominence by recognizing the important role the Hammer can play in the cultural landscape,” says Lisa Phillips, director of the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. “She has made the Hammer an essential destination in Los Angeles.” Philbin’s efforts have convinced respected curators to join her staff, including Gary Garrels, who left New York’s Museum of Modern Art (where he was chief curator of drawings and a curator in the department of painting and sculpture) to become senior curator of the Hammer last year. “The Hammer gives me the chance to do things that are more about opening a dialogue than finalizing a statement,” says Garrels. “To be invited to be a part of this conversation, thinking about artists and where we are in contemporary art, was really appealing.”

Philbin has also attracted more visitors. Annual attendance doubled to 100,000 last year from 50,000 in 2000. To accommodate the growing crowds, the Hammer recently launched a multiphase expansion. In December the museum will inaugurate the Billy Wilder Theater, a 300-seat venue designed by architect Michael Maltzan. The theater will be jointly programmed with the UCLA Film and Television Archive and was primarily funded by a \$5 million donation from the filmmaker’s widow, Audrey. Subsequent phases of the expansion are still in the planning stages. Philbin’s wish list includes “more gallery space for a growing permanent collection of contemporary art, increased storage, and improved public amenities, such as adding a restaurant.” In terms of design, she envisions “making the space more functional and welcoming and softening the building’s corporate edge.”

In addition to providing new venues for the museum’s popular readings, lectures, and concerts, the expansion will complete Hammer’s vision for the building, a modern, marble-clad structure on the edge of UCLA’s campus. The Occidental Petroleum chairman opened the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Culture Center in 1990 to house his collection of works by the 19th-century French caricaturist Honoré Daumier as well as Old Master, Impressionist, and Post-Impressionist paintings. Hammer died three weeks after the opening, and Occidental stockholders sued the museum, alleging that it had been built with funds drawn illegally from the company. The final stages of construction were halted, leaving several spaces, including the planned theater, unfinished.

In 1994, the museum entered a partnership with UCLA under which the university relocated to the Hammer the collections and staff of its Wight Art Gallery and Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts and assumed management and operations of the entire institution. Henry Hopkins, director of the Wight gallery, became director, serving until his retirement in 1998.

The Hammer now oversees the university’s 45,000-piece Grunwald collection of works on paper from the Renaissance to the present as well as the Franklin D. Murphy Sculpture Garden. A selection of works from Hammer’s collection, including paintings by Mary Cassatt, Monet, Pissarro, Rembrandt, and van Gogh, are on permanent display. Occidental owns the building but does not charge the museum rent; operating costs—\$7 million to \$10 million annually—come from income earned on an investment portfolio that Occidental

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established at the museum's inception, now worth \$50 million, as well as from contributions from the Regents of the University of California and private and corporate donors.

Philbin, who succeeded Hopkins in 1999, developed an interest in art as a child. She was raised in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., where her mother, a nurse and amateur painter, took her to museums. After earning a bachelor's degree in painting and art history at the University of New Hampshire, she moved to New York in 1976 to become an artist. She supported herself as a researcher at the Frick Art Reference Library for two years, but her formative experience, she says, was working at two alternative spaces, the New Museum of Contemporary Art and Artists Space, between 1978 and 1980. Philbin says the institutions' directors—Marcia Tucker and Linda Shearer, respectively—contributed to her decision to pursue a career in arts administration rather than her own art. "I saw them both as role models," she says. "They defined a career option for me that was more oriented to contemporary art than traditional museum work."

Philbin received a master's degree in museum studies and arts administration at New York University in 1982 while serving as curator of the private Ian Woodner Family Collection of Old Master drawings. She worked for dealers Curt Marcus and Grace Borgenicht for a few years but by 1987 had decided that she "wasn't cut out for the commercial sector. I was more interested in the curatorial process and in showing a variety of different artists," she says.

After a few years of coordinating projects for the arts-management and marketing firm Livet Reichard, Philbin was hired as director of New York's Drawing Center in 1990. Over the following nine years, she raised the institution's profile by expanding the definition of drawing and was instrumental in giving artists such as Kara Walker and Jack Pierson their first big shows. The Drawing Center "became an important place for emerging artists to show their work," Philbin says, "but also a downtown hub to address the issues of the day."

When Philbin assumed leadership of the Hammer, she saw the institution's potential as a center for contemporary art and began adding shows of living artists to the exhibition schedule.

Notable recent offerings include a 2003–4 traveling Lee Bon-tecou retrospective, cocurated by Philbin, that returned the reclusive artist to the public eye. This fall, the museum will mount the first U.S. retrospective (organized with Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art) for German photographer Wolfgang Tillmans. The museum also recently began assembling a contemporary collection and has already received a gift

of 80 works by such artists as Roy Arden, Ed Ruscha, and Christopher Williams from Los Angeles gallerist Patrick Painter and his wife, Soo Jin Jeong-Painter.

To highlight cutting-edge work, Philbin established the Hammer Projects series, which has featured solo shows of more than 40 emerging artists, including Paul Chan, Tara Donovan, Arturo Herrera, Miranda Lichtenstein, and Barry McGee. The current installment, on display until July 30, presents Los Angeles-based Monique van Genderen's large-scale wall "paintings" created with adhesive vinyl.

Philbin has also involved contemporary artists in the running of the museum. Serving on the board of overseers are James Welling and Catherine Opie, and plans are in the works to create a larger group of artist-advisers.

Philbin lives with her partner, Cynthia Wornham, the director of external affairs for the Sundance Institute, in a bungalow north of Sunset Plaza. There, white upholstered furniture and

large windows create a bright setting for their collection of works by Los Angeles artists John Baldessari, Mark Grotjahn, and Raymond Pettibon, as well as Robert Gober, Sol LeWitt, and Kara Walker. Philbin says that living in southern California took some adjustment, but she enjoys hiking and biking and "digging in the dirt."

She has no plans to leave anytime soon. "I am so happy to be running a medium-sized institution where I can personally stay involved with the art and the artists," says Philbin. "Many museums have to be concerned with their box office. Being a university museum, we have the luxury of that not being our priority." ■

*Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is a Los Angeles correspondent for ARTnews.*



**The Hammer has explored contemporary trends in survey shows, including last year's "Thing: New Sculpture from Los Angeles."**

**TOP** Aragna Ker's *Sunburst*, 2005. **ABOVE** Kristen Morgin's *Sweet and Low Down*, 2004.