

# LIGHT ON THE LAND

By J. Michael Welton



The new North Carolina Museum of Art, designed by Thomas Phifer Partners of New York, is 127,000 square feet of ethereal space designed to disappear into its landscape over time, deferring quietly to a world-class collection of art inside.

The building, publicly funded to the tune of about \$100 million, is sited on 164 acres on the outskirts of downtown Raleigh. Its landscape is peppered with outdoor sculptures that punctuate miles of scenic walking and biking trails. Sited on a diagonal axis to complement Edward Durell Stone's original 1983 museum building, it's aligned along a new connecting piazza that places Henry Moore's *Large Spindle Piece* at its center and Rodin's *The Thinker* at its terminus.



It's a nearly transparent building that's all about the art, and not about itself. "A lot of buildings try to shout, to gesture. This has none of that – it's very light on the land," Phifer said. "It's simple and slightly reflective. I wanted it to be quiet, meditative and in a sense, dematerializing."

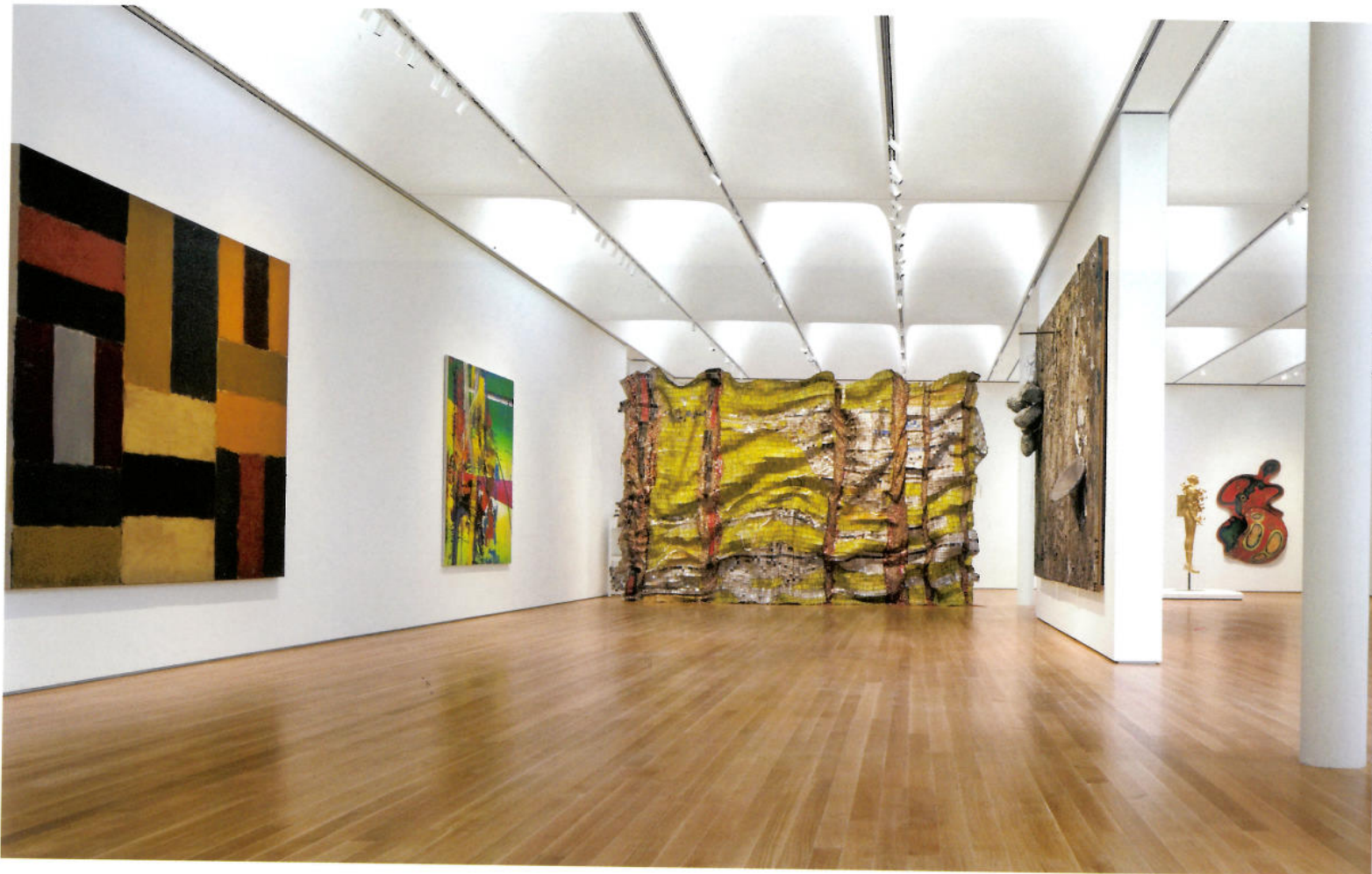
The museum commissioned a number of works for the new building, including two outdoor sculptures designed for specific sites

around it. One is *Askew* by Roxy Paine, who describes her 43-foot-tall sculpture as a "dendroid" – a treelike form with elaborate branching structures. The monumental structure is placed in the museum's south garden, near the main entrance. It's visible from a number of vantage points, both inside and outside the building.

"I've processed the idea of a tree and created a system for its form," Paine said. "I take the

organic, majestic being and break it down into components and rules. The branches are translated into pipe and rod."

A second commissioned piece is the 19-foot-tall cedar and graphite *Ogromna* by Ursula von Rydingsvard. It was created from roughly hewn, cut and stacked cedar blocks. Standing near the museum's west façade, it provides a dramatic first encounter with art for those approaching the complex by vehicle.



Phifer is well known for integrating architecture and nature. He sought inspiration for his assignment from Louis Kahn's Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth and Renzo Piano's Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas and Menil Collection in Houston. Here, he sheathed his one-story box partially in anodized aluminum attached to reflective stainless steel, and partially in floor-to-ceiling glass. It connects landscape to art through a series of five subtractive courtyards slicing into it.

"There's a sensuality of materials that have to do with daylight – and the sound of wind and the change of seasons," Phifer said. "The glass, the polished stainless steel and the aluminum softly reflect the light. I was there the other day, and the building was blue, and then silver. It was a real 'Wow!' moment."

Half its exterior walls are glass; the other half is clad in 230 sleek aluminum panels, one-quarter inch thick, five-and-a-half feet wide and 24 feet tall. They're tiled one on top of another, then tilted two degrees back and six degrees off the stainless steel. The effect on the human eye is one of a building striving to integrate itself into its environment. To help that process along, Phifer surrounded it with native vegetation that will not only hide it over

time, but will grow to tower above its courtyard spaces.

"There are 250 trees on a grid that expresses the architectural geometry into the landscape," said Dan Gottlieb, director of planning and design at the museum. "It's about integrating art and nature – about trees penetrating the subtractive areas. It's really interesting that the architect who's done it is hanging his hat on diaphanous spaces – spaces that disappear."

Phifer's museum is a minimalist structure that places the art collection in a light-infused shrine. "I wanted to make the building quiet, and honor the artwork," he said.

He's done that by devising an elaborate system of lighting that blends natural and artificial illumination, filters out harmful ultraviolet rays, and encourages art-infused riots of color that explode off bright white interior walls.

Fixed, spoon-shaped louvers curve softly atop the building, reminiscent of Kahn's barrel vaults on the Kimbell, and are meant to reflect the elliptical shape of interior coffers below. One objective of the lighting was to exhibit art in the same natural conditions that existed

when Old Masters worked on their paintings.

"The lighting is a transformational experience," said NCMA Curator of Contemporary Art Linda Dougherty. "It's amazing how they've advanced natural lighting so that it doesn't damage the artwork."

As in the landscape outside, a number of newly commissioned pieces were developed for specific spots inside. One is *Out of the Box* by Patrick Dougherty, an organic sculpture adorning a long wall in the museum café. Woven from red maple saplings, the 15-foot, six inch by seventy-five foot, four inch work comprises a series of massive spirals curling across the length of the wall. Using branches and boughs from the surrounding neighborhood, the sculpture encourages a dialog between man and nature, indoor and out, natural and artificial materials, and linear versus non-linear planes.

Nearby, a video exhibition called *Mike Kelley* by Jennifer Steincamp is projected onto an adjacent wall. It's eight luminous minutes of a single tree changing throughout the seasons. The artist cites her memory of talking apple trees in "The Wizard of Oz" as an influence on her work. *Mike Kelley* is designed to provide

a counter point to Roxy Paine's *Askew* outside, and to continue the dialog between the art inside and the landscape outside the new building. And Nigerian artist El Anatsui's *Lines that Link Humanity* is a tapestry-like work made of found aluminum (actually bottle caps and remnants of liquor packaging) and copper wire that measures eighteen by twenty-five feet. It's bright and beautiful, but also makes a statement on the trade in alcoholic beverages in Africa. The title suggests the interconnected histories, fates and circumstances of people and cultures worldwide, while the art itself refers to other works in the museum, including nearby pieces by Gerhard Richter and Anshelm Kiefer.

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er exhibit areas. "The unusual juxtaposition makes you look more carefully at the artwork," Dougherty said.

There is much to look at. The museum collection comprises about 4,000 pieces, and the new building displays 750 of them. When the original 1983 building, now being renovated by Raleigh architects Pearce Brinkley Cease & Lee, re-opens in November, more art will be installed there. Dougherty and the other curators will rotate works on paper every six months, but leave the rest of the permanent collection in the new museum, except when out on loan.

Dougherty's collection of modern and contemporary works of art takes up an entire wing within the building's 65,000 square feet of gallery space. Represented there are works by Motherwell, Giacometti, Picasso, Stella and Katz, among others. There are also two wings for European art, one for American, and another smaller section that's for pre-Columbian and earlier works.

All galleries flow from one to another in an open floor plan that enables an entering visitor to see immediately the depth of the collection, through glimpses into openings off the main, 420-foot-long axis. "It's a spatial experience,"

Dougherty said. "One gallery leads to the next, instead of a series of dead ends."

"It's classically organized by a double loaded corridor," Gottlieb said. "It's not very different from John Russell Pope's National Gallery on the Mall in Washington. There are secondary axes that lead back to courtyards."

The museum enjoys its most lucid moments where indoor and outdoor spaces meet. Inside one gallery, an exhibit of 25 Rodin sculptures opens out to a garden and courtyard planted with bamboo trees swaying in Carolina breezes. There, along a gravel path, six larger-than-life black Rodin sculptures mutely greet the astonished visitor. "The Rodin exhibit is really a seamless experience from interior to exterior," said Dougherty. "It's the most successful."

The bare ethos of his new building, Phifer said, is about the light, the landscape and the art. "I think people really do feel the urgency to connect to nature – to that sense of being connected to their surroundings," he said. "It's a modern, contemporary notion: how much of this can I strip away and have the sculptures in the landscape be the stars of the show? If we've come anywhere close to this, we've come to a contemporary notion of architecture."

Gottlieb takes the concept a step further. "This is a different kind of openness for a museum. It's not been done before," he said. "It's a new paradigm – a different kind of model in the museum planning world, in the architecture planning world and in the art planning world."

Goethe may have thought of architecture as frozen music, but in North Carolina, Tom Phifer has arrived at a new definition. At this museum, artwork sings in bright bursts of color, exterior walls seek a retreat into nature and a growing environment slowly reclaims the space it once occupied.

There's nothing frozen about it.

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IMAGES: Courtesy of Jeanne Collins and Associates, New York.

