

*The New York Times* / ARTS

## Cedar Grove, Peabody Essex and Other Niche Museums Foray Into Contemporary Art

BY TED LOOS  
MARCH 16, 2015



Kevin Yu in the Coregami 'Gershwin' tuxedo shirt. Credit Sil Azevedo

Cedar Grove, the Thomas Cole National Historic Site in Catskill, N.Y., is devoted to the life and art of that Hudson River School painter, who is known all over the world for his richly detailed landscapes.

But in May, for the first time, the 1815 Federal-style house will be incongruously filled with works by contemporary artists. Four Cindy Sherman photographs will hang over Cole's mantle as part of "River Crossings," a two-part show organized with Olana, the Frederic Church house across the river in Hudson, N.Y.

"The works will have special resonance here," Cedar Grove's director, Elizabeth B. Jacks, said of the pieces Cedar Grove will host by Sherman, Kiki Smith and Charles LeDray. (Olana will feature pieces by Martin Puryear and Maya Lin.)

"Cole had contemporary art on his walls — it was still wet," she added. "We want to get across that this was the start of something big."

Cedar Grove is not alone among smaller institutions and niche museums that want to inject fresh life into their programming — and to reframe their core holdings — with contemporary art.

The trend has been picking up steam at places like the Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme, Conn., founded to house and celebrate American Impressionist canvases done in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Right now, all three of the Griswold's main galleries are filled with the brightly colored abstractions of Peter Halley, who has a home nearby and splits his time between

Connecticut and New York City.

“Peter Halley: Big Paintings” is on view through May 31 and represents the biggest contemporary exhibition yet for the museum, which has been experimenting with the genre for a few years.

“Our history is unusual in that we are a historic site and a museum with origins as an artist colony,” said the Griswold’s director, Jeff Andersen. “We were looking to see how that creativity could be reimagined in a contemporary sense.”

Curatorial reasoning aside, there are also practical underpinnings to this trend as museums try to figure out how to get people of all ages in the door.

“Contemporary art is an opportunity for us to engage newer, younger audiences who think Impressionist painting is passé,” Mr. Andersen said. “This is more risk-taking for us — it’s extending our reach.”

Just a few miles away, in New London, a programming shift at the Lyman Allyn Art Museum, established in 1926, demonstrates how the shift toward present-day work can also be fueled by a symbiotic relationship with the art market.

In 2010, the dealer Fred Torres, based in New York City, was asked by Nancy Stula, then the Lyman Allyn’s director, to help refresh its exhibition schedule. “Museums always want younger audiences — they just don’t know how to get them,” Mr. Torres said.

Mr. Torres was both dealer and agent for the photographer David LaChapelle at the time, so he suggested a show of Mr. LaChapelle’s work. (Since then, they have had a serious falling-out, leading to a lawsuit.) “I was helping my client, but also helping them,” Mr. Torres said.

The show was popular, and in 2013 Mr. Torres followed up with a show of both the work of Mr. LaChapelle and Courtney Love, the singer, who considers Mr. LaChapelle one of her mentors in the visual arts.

“They had never had anything like Courtney Love before,” Mr. Torres said. “The opening was unbelievably packed. The leadership loved it.”

The trend is hardly limited to smaller institutions. The venerable Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Mass., best known for large holdings of Asian export art and maritime-themed works that were collected centuries ago, not only started aggressively showing cutting-edge art in 2010, by Candice Breitz, Michael Lin and others, but it also recently changed the title of its contemporary curator to “curator of present tense.”

But the shift in focus is more striking when the museum has fewer holdings in the first place. And all it takes is one big gift to move the needle.

In 2013 the Cornell Fine Arts Museum at Rollins College in Winter Park, Fla., began receiving a gift of 235 contemporary works from Barbara and Ted Alfond.

“Previously, we had about 20 works from the 21st century,” said the museum’s

director, Ena Heller, who noted that the Cornell was previously best known for its holdings of old masters and 18th- and 19th- century art. “Now we have this other bookend.”

The Alford Collection of Contemporary Art — including works by Vik Muniz, Tracey Emin and Alfredo Jaar — is so significant that it represents 75 percent of all the works that have entered the museum’s collection in the last decade.

Some of the collection was recently on view in an exhibition called “Fractured Narratives: A Strategy to Engage,” and Ms. Heller said the Cornell’s status as a teaching museum made the gift especially “relevant,” a word that frequently comes up with institutions moving toward contemporary art.

“It’s art that’s being made today and that resonates more with the 18-to-21-year-old group than what was made 300 years ago,” she said. “We need to show where we are now.”

A version of this article appears in print on March 19, 2015, on page F10 of the New York edition with the headline: Displaying New Art in Old Museums.

© 2015 The New York Times Company

Loos, Ted. “Cedar Grove, Peabody Essex and Other Niche Museums Foray Into Contemporary Art”  
*The New York Times*, March 16, 2015.

[http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/19/arts/artsspecial/cedar-grove-peabody-essex-and-other-niche-museums-foray-into-contemporary-art.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/19/arts/artsspecial/cedar-grove-peabody-essex-and-other-niche-museums-foray-into-contemporary-art.html?_r=1)