

Mesa Rising: The East Valley City Is the Unlikely Home of a Vibrant Arts Scene

BY LYNN TRIMBLE

TUESDAY, JUNE 14, 2016 AT 6 A.M.



Part of the seven-acre Mesa Arts Center campus.

Jim Louvau

Cindy Ornstein is lamenting the loss of pink. She's looking down at geometric patterns on an outdoor plaza, remembering the mix of bright flamingo pink with deep azure blue that once infused the public art beneath her feet. It's Saturday night at Mesa Arts Center, where Ornstein serves as executive director, and there's activity all around her. But she's laser focused on those tiles, concerned the Arizona sun has taken its toll on *Musical Shadows*, an interactive piece by the Canadian design studio Daily tous les jours, which responds to human shadows with sounds.

Those tiles were hard won by Ornstein and her team; they secured the \$300,000 grant that made *Musical Shadows* possible. But don't bother telling that to the hundreds of people milling about the plaza, including the ones racing across the faded installation, amazed by noises emanating from brass circular vents the size of grapefruit slices.

They've come for Spark! After Dark, a three-hour festival-style event complete with live painting by eight metro Phoenix street artists, a DJ doing his best Motown-infused dance mix, and a new exhibition by international artist El Mac, who grew up in Phoenix long before the decade-old Mesa Arts Center took shape.

As visitors explore the details of El Mac's large-scale paintings hanging inside a gallery at the Mesa Contemporary Arts Museum, and the two-story mural of a woman holding a red rose he recently painted on the concrete exterior of the museum's elevator shaft, Ornstein attends to other details. She makes a mental note to get those tiles taken care of, then strolls briskly through other pockets of activity – making sure everything is going as planned, without making a big deal of her presence. Wearing a mustard-colored top with gold India-inspired trim, and rectangular eyeglasses that read playful yet professional, she pauses often to talk with patrons.

Some are sipping drinks, seated on inflatable furniture placed in cozy groupings to create a lounge-type feel for the event. Others are seated at bistro-style café tables, eating falafels or waffles from food trucks parked along the plaza.

Throughout the night, people explore parts of Mesa Arts Center that Ornstein made happen – from an outdoor stage that doubles as a dance floor to red plastic chairs that twirl like spinning tops. She's busy thinking about what comes next, like ways to modify the parking lot so she can also use it as an events plaza. So far, she's picturing solar panels that provide shade and a surface material that looks like large, bright tiles.

She'll need to come up with a way to keep the colors from fading.



Attendees watch muralists live paint at Spark! After Dark.

Lynn Trimble

Mesa's got a reputation as a sleepy suburb steeped in conservative ideology, yet it's quickly becoming known as home to one of the finest visual- and performing-arts venues in the Southwest – and one that does not shy away from edgy content, especially when it comes to exhibitions at the Mesa Contemporary Arts Museum.

During the past decade, the museum has exhibited work exploring or depicting animal dissection, immigration, domestic violence, mental illness, and weaponry. The roster of artists who've shown there is impressive. Julie Comnick created videos showing huge piles of burning violins, and Chris Rush drew images of people with disabilities that evoked voyeuristic stares.

It's not what you would expect in light of the city's history.

Mesa started with a series of Mormon settlements in the late 1870s, when covered wagons traveled near parts now marked by Valley Metro light-rail routes. Some pioneers settled atop an actual mesa, a flattened geographical formation where Mesa sits today, and dug out canals first created by the Hohokam many centuries before. Early Mesa had 300 or so people living in a one-square-mile area. Today, it covers 131 square miles, and almost half a million people call it home. That makes it the third largest city in Arizona, after Phoenix and Tucson.

Fewer than 15 percent of Mesa's residents are Mormons, but the influence of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is strong. Both Mayor John Giles and his predecessor Scott Smith are Mormons. And descendants of the first Mormon settlers still have significant land holdings. Several buildings and businesses in and around downtown Mesa still bear their names – Crismon, Pomeroy, Robson, and Serrine. A large Mormon temple is a focal point downtown. There's a significant Catholic presence as well, in part because one in four people living in Mesa is Latino.

Mesa's Mormon roots help explain its conservative bent, which caught the attention of UCLA and MIT researchers, who dubbed it the country's "most conservative city" in 2014.

Sometimes that's a problem, like when it morphs into extreme ideologies or actions.

Four days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, a Sikh American gas-station owner in Mesa was murdered by a man who assumed he was an Arab Muslim. Just last year, a white supremacist fatally shot six people in Mesa. The city is 64 percent white, compared to Phoenix's 47 percent, and the nation's 58 percent. In 2010, Mesa Republican and former State Senator Russell Pearce put Arizona on the map with SB 1070, the notorious "papers please" anti-immigration law. In 2014, Pearce announced that women getting Medicaid should be subject to drug testing and forced birth control or sterilization. More recently, there's been controversy over whether Mesa should adopt an anti-discrimination ordinance to protect its LGBT residents.

Frankly, Mesa doesn't have a great reputation.

But Mesa Arts Center, with a performing arts lineup that dives into tough issues, could change that. Last year, local artists performed a mix of dance, music, and phonetic spit poetry exploring the Black Lives Matter movement. Musical artist Dahlak recently blended hip-hop with theatrical performance for a piece addressing law, religion, addiction, and the criminal-justice system. Next season, they'll present the world premiere of a play about Malcolm X.

Even Mesa Arts Center's architecture, which sets a vibrant tone, contrasts with its surroundings. Main Street west of Mesa Arts Center is lined with mostly boring beige buildings, but building exteriors on the Mesa Arts Center campus are painted with desert hues of sunset orange, sage green, and purple sage blossoms. Designed by Portland-based Boora Architects and Phoenix firm DWL Architects + Planners, the campus also has a shadow walk lined with desert plants running through the center of campus, parallel to a water feature that conjures images of a running stream. Cactus rise next to translucent glass panels in saturated teal, sunny yellow, and chili red – casting shadows as lights shine through them each night. Off-white, sail-like, fiberglass canopies suspended overhead offer shade and up the aesthetic appeal. Water runs over a wall in a lower courtyard at the base of El Mac's mural.

Mesa Arts Center is bringing people downtown, to the tune of 450,000 visits a year. Some come for the festivals, which feature cutting-edge work by local and international artists. During the Spark! Festival of Creativity in March, guests watched dancers from Brooklyn-based artist collective Purring Tiger interact with the spandex membrane of a large transparent panel – then got the chance to touch it themselves, creating random visual patterns with sounds. Others come for classes like glassblowing or blacksmithing that are hard to find elsewhere. Concert-goers can choose from diverse offerings such as singer/songwriter Elvis Costello, violinist Itzhak Perlman, or progressive metal band Dream Theater. And next season's lineup is looking good – from culinary maven Ina Garten to works by dance legend Twyla Tharp. All perform in spaces with state-of-the-art acoustics designed by the California firm that did renovations for Phoenix's Symphony Hall.

The Mesa Contemporary Arts Museum is equally impressive, with its collection of more than 500 works in diverse media, exhibition spaces dedicated to showing works by local artists, and shows featuring edgy, nationally renowned artists like Spencer Tunick and Sandow Birk. One photographs installations of naked bodies; the other incorporates motifs from traditional Islamic arts. Next season, the museum will show cutting-edge contemporary art in collaboration with Thinkspace Gallery in Los Angeles.

Exhibitions are always free.



The opening reception for the Patricia Sannit and Christopher Jagmine exhibit at the Mesa Contemporary Arts Museum.

Lynn Trimble

Mesa has other arts and cultural resources, as well. The i.d.e.a. Museum presents themed exhibitions for families that blend fine art with hands-on activities. The Art Gallery at Mesa Community College, which opened in February, has an impressive collection of works by renowned artists including Alexander Calder and William Wegman, as well as high-caliber local artists. There's also a grassroots art scene separate and apart from Mesa Arts Center – which includes a small community space called The Millet House tucked away off the beaten path, the Mesa Urban Garden, which has several murals by well-known local artists, and a couple of retail businesses on Main Street that regularly show work by more than a dozen local artists.

Cassidy Campana, who lives in Scottsdale and sits on the board for Mesa Arts Center Foundation, has long followed the arts scene throughout metro Phoenix. She's got a compelling list of what distinguishes Mesa Arts Center from other area arts venues, including its architectural details, outdoor spaces, strong showing of local artists, and a broad range of offerings – including visual art, performance art, and classes. But there's something else at play.

“Cindy Ornstein is a very strong manager,” Campana says. “She’s constantly looking around the country for the next big thing.”



Joe O'Connell sculptures in a pocket park near the Main Street and Country Club Drive light-rail stop.

Lynn Trimble

Ornstein was working in Flint, Michigan, the day she got the call from an executive recruiter helping the City of Mesa look for new arts leadership. Flint was struggling with a declining U.S. auto industry, a fact made known by Flint-born filmmaker Michael Moore, whose 1989 *Roger & Me* depicted General Motors president Roger Smith closing Flint auto factories so he could profit from cheaper labor costs in Mexico. Today, Flint has an even lousier reputation, fueled by recent problems with lead-laced drinking water.

In between, Ornstein initiated projects by significant artists including Urban Bush Women and Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, oversaw an endowment of more than \$30 million, and supervised directors of multiple cultural venues including a history museum, performing arts venue, and planetarium.

Born in Manhattan, Ornstein grew up in the Bronx and Westchester County, New York. She went with different family members to see opera, theater, and art exhibits – and developed particular interests in theater and creative writing. After earning a B.A. in English at Vassar College, she earned her M.A. in liberal studies with a focus on American culture from the University of Michigan. Early on she worked doing copywriting, editing, and public relations in Chicago and New York. She has also lived and worked in Atlanta and Allentown, Pennsylvania, in leadership positions with a publishing house, an arts festival, and an art museum. In 2000, Ornstein became president and CEO of Flint Cultural Center Corporation – the job she held until coming to Arizona.



Cindy Ornstein, executive director of Mesa Arts Center.

Jim Louvau

Ornstein says she loved her job in Flint, which included creating art programs that could help address city struggles with poverty, segregation, and infrastructure. But she was curious when she got the call about Mesa.

She shared the news with her husband, then asked his thoughts about Mesa. “It sounds like LA without water,” he said. Looking back, she’s amused by those earlier misconceptions.

“We found out it was totally untrue in just about every way, which we were happy about,” Ornstein says. She made her first trip to Mesa in February 2010. She hit the sweet spot – arriving just as the orange blossoms that infuse gentle breezes with fragrance for only a short time each year were peaking.

The first thing that struck her was the color. “I didn’t expect it to be as green as it is,” Ornstein says. “I pictured it much more desert beige.” But art in public spaces, including designs built into highway retaining walls, also caught her eye. “I was struck by the fact that people cared about the built environment.” It’s a stark contrast to what she recalls of growing up in New York. “It’s very dense there, with aging, utilitarian infrastructure.” Then she saw the Mesa Arts Center campus. “I was blown away by its gorgeousness and potential, and its setting in the heart of downtown,” Ornstein says. Mesa Arts Center actually beat out the Sydney Opera House in Australia when the International Association of Venue Managers named it the best performing arts center of 2012. But Ornstein says it wasn’t the stunning venue that brought her to Mesa. It was the chance to once again use the arts as a way to make an impact on the community.

Choreographer and dancer Elizabeth Johnson, an artist-in-residence for community engagement at Mesa Arts Center, worked with Ornstein back in Flint.

“There’s no artist versus non-artist divide here,” she says of Ornstein’s equal attention to both the venue and its surroundings. “There’s a democratization of art at Mesa Arts Center so people can engage art instead of just consume it,” Johnson says. “People feel a real sense of belonging here.”

NEXT PAGE 

Sponsor Content

©2016 Phoenix New Times, LLC. All rights reserved.

