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CAC's new director applauds 'heroism' during Mapplethorpe obscenity trial

David Lyman Special to Cincinnati Enquirer

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After a national search that stretched on for nearly 16 months, the Contemporary Arts Center, on Wednesday morning, named Christina Vassallo its new Alice & Harris Weston Director.

Vassallo, who steps into her new role in mid-March 2023, is currently the executive director of the Fabric Workshop and Museum, a 45-year-old Philadelphia arts organization committed “both to the creation and presentation of innovative works of art.” Prior to that, she spent nearly six years as the executive and artistic director of Spaces, in Cleveland.

“It was important to the Board that we select someone with an understanding of not just contemporary art, but the needs and interests of the region,” wrote CAC board president Gale Beckett in a prepared statement.

Vassallo was raised in northern New Jersey, just a few miles across the George Washington Bridge from New York City, where she earned a bachelor's degree in art history and a master's in nonprofit visual arts management at New York University.

By Vassallo's own admission, though, working in the Midwest was something of a revelation to her.

“Going to grad school at NYU, my goal was to work in a large coastal city, preferably New York or LA,” said Vassallo, speaking by phone on Tuesday evening. “And I did that for a little while. Then, Spaces happened for me. It was so exciting for me to learn that I could thrive in a Midwest city. People were so warm and welcoming. But even more important, they were open to what we were doing.”

And it wasn't just the robust levels of state and county funding, which she described as “Excellent. But it was also the incredible thinkers and doers that I found there. I get the sense

that the same qualities are strong in Cincinnati.”

Connections to the Mapplethorpe trial

It was during her time in Cleveland that she became friends with Dennis Barrie, the former CAC director who shepherded the museum through the controversy that surrounded The Perfect Moment, the museum’s 1990 exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe photography.

Both Barrie and the museum were charged with pandering to obscenity. After a court case that brought international attention to Cincinnati, the jury settled in Barrie and the museum’s favor. Vassallo said that the Mapplethorpe case was one of the most memorable case studies she explored during her time at NYU.

“At the time, I thought that the heroism shown by Dennis and the staff in the face of such criticism and the threat of canceled funding was remarkable,” Vassallo said.

When she arrived in Cleveland, it turned out that Barrie’s wife was one of the founders of Spaces. It was the beginning of a valued personal and professional friendship. So, naturally, when she was contacted about stepping into the same role that Barrie had more than 30 years ago, she immediately got in touch with him.

“He’s a consummate pro, and so, of course, I asked for his thoughts,” Vassallo said. Despite the tumultuous times he faced here, Barrie “shared his fondness for the people, the city and the CAC.”

What's next for the Contemporary Arts Center?

As for her goals for the CAC, Vassallo declined to speculate on any immediate plans or changes.

“I will say that the overarching theme of my work has been in running organizations that support the creation and experience of new art – that won’t change,” she said. Like all arts institutions – indeed, nearly all organizations – one of the more pressing issues is how museums can return to their pre-pandemic levels of activity.

“We’ll address that and many other things as we develop a new strategic plan,” she said. “But it is obvious that the CAC board is very engaged and has enormous enthusiasm for everything the CAC does.”

“One thing I do know for certain is that I will be coming to an extraordinary and trail-blazing institution. During my visit there, I could feel the vitality of the city. I had the good fortune to be there for the opening of an exhibition and I got to see how vital the building can be, how many people were so enthusiastic about what goes on there. I can’t wait to be a part of it.”

For the moment, though, she will be exploring ways to make full use of the museum’s newly opened \$5 million Creativity Center, described as “a space for intergenerational, hands-on making and learning with an underlying focus on sustainability.”

And preparations are already underway for ways to commemorate the CAC’s 20th year in the seven-story Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art, the first U.S. project designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Zaha Hadid, famously described by New York Times architecture critic Herbert Muschamp as “the most important American building to be completed since the end of the Cold War.”