

New ICA makes a 'very, very cool' impression

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Artists, critics, academics take preopening tour



Shirley Gray of Chestnut Hill was among those who attended a special tour of the Institute of Contemporary Art, where she viewed "Beetle Manifesto XIII (Genesis)" by Tam Van Tran. (David L. Ryan/ Globe Staff)

By Mark Shanahan, Globe Staff | December 3, 2006

Strolling through the Institute of Contemporary Art's dramatic new digs, Thomas Messer pronounced himself positively wowed yesterday. A onetime ICA director who went on to become boss of New York's Guggenheim Museum, Messer, 86, remembers when the ICA was barely subsisting.

"I'm altogether impressed with what they've done here," Messer said. "During my time here in the '50s, the ICA was constantly moving and on the verge of bankruptcy. This is quite incredible."

The museum's \$51 million new home on the Boston waterfront officially opens tomorrow, but the smart set -- a crowd of artists, architects, critics, curators, and academics -- got a sneak peek over the weekend, and their reactions ranged from favorable to fabulous.

"This sets the standard for the 21st-century museum," declared Edward Dimendberg, an associate professor of visual studies at the University of California at Irvine. "The building itself is a piece of contemporary art."

Boldly designed by architects Diller Scofidio + Renfro, the ultramodern museum may look from the street like an enormous Freezer Pack. But the interior -- with its sleek gallery space animated by natural light, its 5,200-square-foot performing arts theater, and its incomparable views of Boston Harbor -- bowled visitors over yesterday.

"This is very cool," said Margaret Crawford, a professor at Harvard's School of Design. "No, this is very, very cool. I think it could be transformative for Boston in terms of the future of

Nicholas Baume, the ICA's chief curator, was clearly excited to watch art-world authorities such as Messer and Whitney Museum director Adam Weinberg react to the space for the first time.

"If we were loved by the cognoscenti and loathed by our Boston audience, I'd be terribly upset," said Baume. "But I don't think that will happen."

Neither does Shirley Gray, a longtime arts supporter from Chestnut Hill who was checking out the new building with her friend, Shirlee Isenberg, who lives in Newton

"This is avant, to say the least," said Gray, staring at artist Tam Van Tran's provocative piece incorporating seaweed and staples. "I don't understand all of the art, but I don't want to understand it. It's just a shame we had to wait so long for something like this."

As one might expect, the ICA is celebrating the completion of the city's first new museum in more than a century with a series of lavish get-togethers.

Last night, the museum hosted a party with a guest list that included artists, art specialists, and assorted tastemakers such as Sotheby's principal New York auctioneer Tobias Meyer and renowned collector Agnes Gund.

On Friday, the ICA trustees -- a group that includes psychiatrist Paul Buittenweiser, salon owner Mario Russo, and major benefactor Barbara Lee -- put on a dinner catered by proxies of celebrity chef Wolfgang Puck.

Following a performance by pianist Donal Fox, the 150 or so guests, including State Street Corp. chief executive Ronald Logue, walked to the museum's HarborWalk, a dazzling open space at water's edge.

"As I sat there and listened to Jill [Medvedow, ICA director] and Barbara [Lee] talk, and we're all overlooking the harbor at night, I got incredibly teary," said artist Sheila Gallagher, who has several pieces on display at the museum. "The significance of what this is dawned on me."

Gallagher said she's thrilled about the opening, but also looking forward to the future.

"You see all the blank spaces on the walls and dream about what could go there," she said. "There's still a fantastic sense of possibility."■