

VIRGINIA SHEARER

Executive Director,
Sarasota Art Museum

She's Sarasota Art Museum's new executive director who came on board this past summer. It's an interesting moment in the museum's history as it emerges from COVID with visitors near and far returning. As well, she and her curatorial crew are crafting the exhibition schedule through 2023. With a solid background in arts education, Virginia wants to expand educational opportunities, making the Museum even more accessible to all.

The backstory of the Sarasota Art Museum you probably already know. It was Sarasota High School for 70 years until the school board closed it in 1996. In 2003, a group of Sarasotans came together to pursue having a contemporary art museum. After

a two-year "dialogue," the Sarasota Art Museum partnered with Ringling College of Art + Design to transform the high school into an art museum and visual arts educational center.

Hired in 2015, Anne-Marie Russell was its first executive director, tasked with overseeing the transformation from high school to museum and creating the first exhibits. Well funded (some \$22 million was raised by a committee spearheaded by Wendy Surkis), Sarasota Art Museum opened to the public on December 15, 2019 as the region's first museum dedicated to contemporary art.

Now the museum is an eclectic mix of Ringling's Continuing Studies programs' (Osher and Studio + Digital Arts), lots of classrooms, a café, a gift shop, outdoor sculpture and, not least, two floors of exhibition space totaling some 15,000 square feet.

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She's a quick study due to her extensive background and education including two decades' worth of experience, but also because she's been here before, but at the other museum in town, The Ringling. There she was the Director of Education and after that was the Tampa Museum of Art's Deputy Director for Education and Public Programs.

Most recently however, Virginia was The Eleanor McDonald Stores Director of Education at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia. Arriving there in 2005, she developed a track record of creative initiatives while bolstering and taking the museum's education programs to another level. Part of the Museum's significant growth included opening the Greene Family Education Center, the Louvre Atlanta partnership and development of successful young audience initiatives.

Of the High Museum she says, "It was my kind of place - very supportive. It's a museum that's always pushing itself." The experience was a "good fit" that provided her with what she calls the "blueprint" for her new position at SMA with her skills being "highly transferable."

So this latest move in her career now means she's Executive Director, something she feels that she was ready for, calling it, "thoroughly exciting." Joining her are her husband Arkady Medovoy and their two children, ages 12 and 14 who are enrolled in the Sarasota School of Arts and Science.

Sarasota Art Museum's combination of gallery space, classrooms offering a variety of learning opportunities in a beautifully repurposed building, is rare. "This is pretty unique," she notes and, as she sees it, the museum offers experiences for "teens to seniors," but explains that, "We're going to back that up with a goal of [ages] two to 102." She wants the museum to be a "hub for learning and creativity," integrating exhibits into the classes being offered.

In our visual world, she explains, museums can play a vital role with what is called "slow looking." It's a museum-originated practice that means gaining knowledge through

observation. The goal is to move beyond the first impression—you just need to take a longer look. Viewing and processing some contemporary art, for example, can take time which would negate that, "I just don't get it" first reaction. Taking just a bit longer can give you more out of the experience.

A walk through the grounds and building show exhibit spaces now unrecognizable as a high school and instead, it's a space of exposed brick, museum-style open and meandering spaces and gorgeous flooring milled from beams removed from the building. The exhibits are varied and eclectic, stimulating in one place; contemplative another. As a non-collecting art institution, Sarasota Art Museum will be showing only temporary exhibits from a variety of artists in a variety of mediums.

In addition to the museum's interior exhibit spaces, there's a "gallery" outside where art will be on display and events - weather permitting - will take place. The lobby where hundreds of teens used to pour through on the way to class now has sculpture.

As for exhibits, she explains that typically, there will be two or three exhibitions at one time. "We work with emerging and mid-career artists with work that will be seen first at the Museum. You encounter art everywhere here." She uses a metaphor to describe Sarasota Art Museum: "The Museum is the heart; the classrooms are the hands around it."

Virginia received a Bachelor of Arts degree in humanities from Florida State University and a Master's from The George Washington University in museum education. Her interest in the arts burgeoned in high school, but flourished in college at Florida State. Virginia remembers visiting places like The Uffizi Galleries in Florence, Italy, where she had the opportunity to go behind the scenes. "It blew my mind," she recalls. Back at Florida State, she worked at the campus museum and recalls a Duane Hanson sculpture exhibition and thought, "...contemporary art is where's it's at."

Post graduation she worked at the Albuquerque Museum where she discovered that arts education was what she wanted to do. Then on to the Portland Museum and then graduate studies at George Washington and working at the Smithsonian. She was contacted by The Ringling to "be a partner in their education department. This was pre-FSU oversight of the museum. It was a very roll-up-your-sleeves type of experience."

Virginia admits to being a big fan of Hector D'Amico, the founding Director of the Department of Education of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, who worked at MOMA for 20 years. His beliefs regarding the visitor experience were, "The prototype for today's museum," Virginia explains, introducing then groundbreaking concepts such as family days, a Young People's Gallery at the Museum, classes for all ages, even a TV program.

So now it's her turn to shape the Sarasota Art Museum and, with all of the experience and creative ideas Virginia has, it points to an exciting future for visitors at the museum and the community at large. 📍

STORY: Louise Bruderle

IMAGES: Evelyn England

► For more information, visit <https://www.sarasotaartmuseum.org>

On exhibit: David Budd: Motion Within Stillness runs to March 20, 2022; Samo Davis: Happiness in ROYGBIV runs to December 31, 2021; Felix Gonzalez-Torres runs to May 15, 2022; Judith Linhares: The Artist as Curator runs to April 3, 2022; Danner Washburn; Effigy: Hemric runs December 11, 2021 - May 8, 2022