



# Lisa Berger

## Executive Director, Art Center Sarasota

She's been Art Center Sarasota's Executive Director since 2012. The Center's history goes back to 1926 (then known as the Sarasota Art Association) and became a nonprofit in 1941. Prominent local artists including Syd Solomon and Hilton Leech were committed to the idea that the center would be the nucleus for visual arts in the community. Under Lisa's leadership, that vision continues to be achieved with innovation and mass appeal in exhibits, classes, and events.

ART CENTER



SARASOTA



**A**s an exhibition opportunity for professional and nonprofessional artists, Art Center Sarasota was the first arts organization in Sarasota when it was founded as the Sarasota Art Association in 1926. When it became a nonprofit organization in 1941, prominent local artists including Syd Solomon and Hilton Leech were committed to the idea that the center would be the nucleus for visual arts in the community. Under the leadership of Executive Director Lisa Berger, that vision continues to be achieved with innovation and mass appeal in exhibits, classes, and events.

"We are not a commercial art gallery, a museum, or a school. My role is to provide direction to the organization so there is something for everyone and to encompass all art—traditional or contemporary. We want the center to be inclusive and focus on the community. As the former director of fashion design for a luxury sportswear company in New York, I am acutely aware of one of the most important jobs I learned from the industry—always look to the future. I remember this when planning future exhibits. I am also committed to providing excellent customer service so that visitors have a good experience," Lisa says.

Upon graduation from the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City, Lisa worked as a designer in the fashion industry—a "cut-throat and competitive business," she says—for six years. In 1994 her husband relocated his business to the area where they had a vacation home on Longboat Key. She worked with him for a few years until she and a friend opened a shoe store in downtown Sarasota despite the negative advice of relatives who were in the retail business. Two years later the store closed and, with children in school, Lisa decided to return to an earlier love of figure drawing and took classes at the Art Center Sarasota. She became a Board member, then Development Director, and was hired as the Executive Director in 2012. The center attracts 30,000 to 40,000 visitors a year to the 27 exhibits. Staff numbers 11 and volunteers number 130.

"Lisa is very compassionate about Art Center Sarasota which is reflected in the trajectory of the organization under her tenure as Executive Director," says David Wyant, Jr., attorney and Vice-Chair of the center's Board. "The programming has improved dramatically under her leadership which is not a surprise given how devoted she is to Art Center Sarasota's mission. She is aware of and has embraced many new trends in the art world which are critical to the importance that Art Center Sarasota plays in our community. Due to Lisa's enthusiasm, Art Center Sarasota can be counted on to provide the community with dynamic exhibitions and events that would only otherwise be available in major cities. Art Center Sarasota is fortunate to have such a devoted visionary at the helm who can be relied upon to ensure that Sarasota is an important voice in the contemporary art conversation."

Lisa says, "The allure of the center is the social aspect where there is something for artists and those who want to be around art and artists. The opening receptions for new exhibits are very sociable. We introduce people and encourage artists. Whether one is an artist or in another occupation, creativity and creative thinking is needed. We sponsor a summer children's fashion boot camp to express their creativity. All the

employees work incredibly hard and the reward is when people tell us how wonderful the center is and how the place changed their lives."

Art Center Sarasota has an ambitious schedule of exhibitions in four galleries that are ever changing. The largest courtyard-type space holds seven cycles of juried shows that anyone may enter. Usually 250 pieces are received with 100-150 pieces displayed. Lisa encourages the juror to look at the composition, use of material, and how the piece is displayed. There are also three exhibit spaces that display works of a solo artist or a thematic group show.

For four years, a peer-juried show allows artists whose work is displayed as well as the public to "vote" on the pieces. Every piece is numbered to correspond to the "ballot" on which the person must select 50 pieces. The votes are tallied and an open critique about the winning pieces is held by the juror. For curated shows, Lisa explains that two curators select professional artists, sometimes unique, different, and/or experimental. These are local higher-achieving artists and occasionally an artist is selected who has exhibited in the juried shows. The center currently has four exhibitions that include a juried show and a large site installation by Abhidnya Ghuge constructed of thousands of paper plates. The center also has an outdoor sculpture garden. A partnership with the Association for the Study of African American Life and History/ASALH features members' work in February during Black History Month. The center has no admission fee, is open every day, and exhibits original artwork that's for sale.

Fashion has been Lisa's passion since she was young. Photos of her at 18 months old show her wearing her mother's clothes and hats. The iConcept fashion show that encourages the use of unconventional material is a throwback to her love of fashion. The center sponsored its first children's iConcept show in September. In 2018 the center is bringing back the Beaux Arts (Costume) Ball "Wildest Dreams" to feature the 10th anniversary of iConcept on May 11 at the Van Wezel.

Lisa's goals are to create an atmosphere where the center is the social hub for artists and others to commune with artwork and each other and to provide the vision that coincides with the property. With a lack of office and meeting space resulting in close working quarters, Lisa is attuned to current discussion by the Sarasota Bayfront Planning Organization on the future development of the city-owned 42 acres where the center built in 1949 and about seven other buildings are located. The organization is tasked with providing a master plan for the property that will retain the cultural, arts, and educational heritage and create a more pedestrian-friendly environment.

Lisa was raised in Boston with two brothers to an artist mother and a father who was in the shoe business and influential in fashion. One of her grown sons lives in St. Petersburg and the other one lives in Sarasota. Her leisure time is spent at the gym, shopping, dining at restaurants, and attending cultural events. She hopes to be remembered as the person who continued the Art Center Sarasota legacy for many generations. 🍷

🍷 STORY: Carol Darling

🍷 IMAGES: Evelyn England