

After 25 Years, Contemporary Arts Center Gets New Directors and Newfound Maturity



Photo by Checko Salgado

Giguet and Quinn are bringing a new level of professionalism to CAC.

By [Jarret Keene](#)

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Walking into [Contemporary Arts Center](#) in January, you would have seen something unforgettable: a 42-foot-long inflatable nude self-sculpture with Sharpie-scribbled body hair and eyeglasses. The giant air-puffed nylon doll was part of New York artist Benjamin Entner's *Ego Sum*, a show that referenced historical statuary and asked viewers to reconsider three-dimensional representation. ... With, you know, balloon figures of a naked dude in tube socks. *Ego Sum* was thoughtful, compelling and made people smile. It symbolizes CAC at its most successful. But triumphant shows haven't always been routine. At times, the volunteer-run, nonprofit organization has struggled with funding and quality control. It has done good work on an eternal shoestring budget, making it our city's most venerable arts institution.

Now, on its 25-year anniversary, CAC's new leadership is trying to give the gallery new life by making it all killer and no filler.

CAC's mission is to offer a place for the community to share in and experience the full range of cultural expression. CAC, located in the [Arts Factory](#), has also served as a training ground and launching pad for local artists and arts leaders. Many artists and private gallerists got their start as CAC members, learning how to install shows and what it means to be curators.

"CAC gave me enthusiasm for curating," says Marty Walsh, who operates Trifecta a few doors down in the Arts Factory. "I never set out to be a gallerist, but here I am, almost 10 years later. It was an opportunity for me to try my hand at it and test my long-term interest."

CAC is also a beacon for those seeking visual stimulation other than Strip neon. CAC is the first place to go when you're new in town and culturally parched.

"Anyone who's going to be involved in the arts in Las Vegas has to seek out CAC," says Brian Paco Alvarez, a local-arts historian and former CAC board member. "It's necessary to build credibility in the community."

Now under new leadership—art consultant Michele Quinn of [MCQ Fine Art Advisory](#) and UNLV [Marjorie Barrick Museum](#) director Aurore Giguét—the Little Downtown Gallery That Could is finally poised to become a force. First, though, it must become a serious gallery. Quinn and Giguét realize it's a challenge. Past obstacles still need to be surmounted.

"A volunteer-run organization inherently sets up problems," Giguét says. "We hope to bring a higher level of professionalism to the table."

Professionalism, indeed. If the name Michele Quinn sounds familiar, it's because she curated CityCenter's massive \$40 million art collection and opened Centerpiece Gallery in Mandarin Oriental. Before that, she was director of [G-C Arts Downtown](#), a leading art gallery. Giguét is no slouch, either, having transformed the Barrick from a dusty natural history museum into a vibrant art gallery that holds pieces from the LVAM collection. Together they're looking to build on a foundation volunteers have long maintained.

Obviously this means making the dues-dependent CAC self-sustainable. No easy feat, since too few know the space exists.

"We have a messaging and branding problem," Quinn says. "People are still not aware of what we do."

“We want CAC to be the hub of the arts in Las Vegas,” Giguet adds. “It certainly has been for some time. It just lacks exposure.”

Of course, exposure isn’t everything. Remember Guggenheim Hermitage Museum in the Venetian and Las Vegas Art Museum in Summerlin? These larger-scale, better-funded, deeply branded efforts shuttered in 2008 and ’09, respectively. So, understandably, there are concerns. Does changing CAC—an amateurish operation that often neglected to collect dues—come with risk? What always seemed to make the CAC unique: It has never had a heart for making money. Will Quinn’s and Giguet’s desire to kick CAC into gear distort its established ability to hone the next generation of local artists and curators?

A group of UNLV art students and instructors formed what was called Contemporary Arts Collective in 1989. The exhibition hall’s original location opened in 1993 on Maryland Parkway in what is a now a florist next to Paymon’s. CAC remained there for years before a fickle landlord sent it packing. The gallery relocated to the proto-arts district in 1996, eventually settling into the Arts Factory.

Over the years, the whole collective issue had to be sorted out. In some ways, the question lingers: Should CAC continue as a forum for strictly Vegas artists? Or should it instead exhibit the best national and international artists?

To be more inclusive to the public—to art-interested people wary of joining what might sound like a clique—the board changed the name to Contemporary Arts Center in 2009. It seemed to work; membership numbers increased.

A part of CAC’s longevity lies with its landlord, Wes Isbutt. Over the years, he has supported CAC by forgiving late rent payments—even nonpayments. Isbutt may be CAC’s savior, but some hold him responsible for bringing the nonprofit to its nadir. In 2011, he overrode CAC’s board and installed a benefit show for the gallery by displaying and selling works of the late serial killer John Wayne Gacy. It was a debacle. CAC’s exhibition committee members unanimously quit.

Isbutt remains unapologetic.

“Look, CAC had absolutely no money at that point, and things were desperate,” he says. “I came up with an idea that paid for the gallery’s rent for a whole year.” (Sales from the Gacy show raised, Isbutt claims, somewhere close to \$10,000.)

Isbutt still champions CAC, even while scoffing at a few of the current board's decisions. He insists the gallery houses the best shows and will continue to do so.

"People believe in it," arts advocate Alvarez says. "It has ups and downs and an occasional bummer show. But ultimately you get back more than you put into it."

CAC hung on through drought conditions, a stubborn cactus nestled in caliche. Sometimes it seemed basic maintenance was neglected. You couldn't really fault the directors: Most visitors stumbled through while intoxicated during First Fridays. Why bother painting the walls? Or sweeping?

Ultimately the biggest problem with CAC—with any nonprofit, really—is raising money. Quinn and Giguet seem capable of meeting this challenge, too. The duo is heading into this anniversary year with the goal of a \$75,000 yearlong capital campaign. It starts May 2 with the unveiling of *Exquisite Corpse*, a 20-artist, surrealist-inspired fundraiser-show. It features 20 collaborative drawings and collages. The artists involved have all exhibited (or will soon) at CAC, with proceeds from sales of their works to benefit the organization.

"The artists involved didn't half-ass it," Quinn says. "They were eager to participate, and it speaks to their commitment to the arts community. People are excited. We hope this translates into a more solid atmosphere for CAC."

There's also an IndieGoGo online campaign launching soon, as well as a monthly series of roundtable discussions, [conversations@cac](#), with panelists from the local arts community.

There is fresh paint on the walls. The floor is swept. The website is (finally) updated and easy to navigate, and purchasing a CAC membership is a snap with PayPal. The programming looks solid, too. There's even a smaller gallery revamped as a project space to display curatorial projects. Indeed, the execution of running a legitimate gallery seems to be under way and doing well. Quinn and Giguet are focusing their energies on Preview Thursday, the night before [First Friday](#).

"First Friday is great," Quinn says. "But the artists' works are being seen, appreciated and bought on Preview Thursdays. It's a more adult atmosphere for viewing art."

A big sign on its door now announces that the gallery closes at 8 p.m. on First Fridays. Which is right when the street festival gets cooking and thousands of people make their way through the Arts Factory.

Isbutt shakes his head at this.

“Every CAC board of directors before this one paid rent based on what they made off First Friday,” Isbutt says. “If you can’t sell anything when there are thousands coming through? Do you know how many galleries would want that opportunity?”

Still, talking with Quinn and Giguet you can’t help but sense the grown-ups are finally running CAC. It comes back to staffing for them. To run a professional gallery, you need to pay people to work consistent hours. Indeed, it’s time to get real about CAC’s role in the art scene and beyond.

“Besides, Aurore and I can’t do this for the rest of our lives,” Quinn jokes.

If not, there’s a good chance the arts community will be ready to step in.

“CAC’s future gives me hope that Vegas has a heart for things other than money,” Alvarez says. “CAC survives because of those who believe in art and culture.”