

Vegas Is Always Home

Kristen Peterson Aug. 24, 2018



QUINN OF ARTS From her own gallery to corporate collections, Michele Quinn helped shape the Las Vegas arts scene.

As she leaves Las Vegas, Michele Quinn — gallerist, curator, consultant — reflects on her impact, local audiences and collectors, and the state of the arts in her hometown.

When Las Vegas native Michele Quinn left New York City in 2003 to move back to her hometown, it probably seemed a crazy, even ridiculous decision to anyone taking note. She'd received her master's in arts administration from New York University and an MBA in finance and marketing from Fordham University; interned at Leo Castelli Gallery; and worked for Christie's, Sotheby's, Brooke Alexander, and elsewhere. As a gallery director in New York, the mecca of the contemporary art world, there was really not much for someone on that career track to return for.



A sculpture by Henry Moore

But back in Las Vegas, art collector and casino executive Glenn Schaeffer was building up his art collection and opening a blue-chip gallery at Mandalay Place and needed someone to run it, as well as curate his own collection. She took the job. Later, she opened a satellite gallery on Main Street, showing works by James Turrell, Robert Rauschenberg, and Dennis Hopper, before opening her MCQ Fine Art Advisory Services on Seventh Street and curating casino corporate collections.

Her biggest project, the \$40 million art program at CityCenter, brought in notable works by Maya Lin, Nancy Rubins, Henry Moore, Frank Stella, and others.

More recently, she gave Las Vegas artists a larger platform by co-curating the sweeping exhibit *Tilting the Basin: Contemporary Art of Nevada* for the Nevada Museum of Art, which featured the best of contemporary art being made across the state. She also secured a local venue for the exhibit on Commerce Street, where she and Steven Molasky were working on a large-scale new arts and real estate project, the Smart Initiative. She's also been heavily involved in plans for a museum in Symphony Park, an effort that's now merged with the Reno museum.

Now, Quinn left Las Vegas to be director of collections at Vulcan Inc., a Seattle company established by billionaire Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen that branches into real estate, art, philanthropy, business, and the sciences — another move that she just couldn't turn down.

How did this come about?

Completely out of the blue, there was a headhunter who reached out. It was a worldwide search, and I'd gotten the offer, so I thought I'd try it and see what happened. I was not looking to leave. But working with this collection, working with the team up here (in Seattle), working with some of the best brains in the world, it's almost intimidating. These people are changing the world, not just from an art perspective, but from a reality perspective. I just want to be around that and see what that's like.

Were you shocked by the decision?

I was. It took a while. During that whole process it made me think, "Do I want to really do this? Do I want to move?" It was a big decision, but this position is unique. I also don't feel like I'm leaving 100 percent. Vegas is always home. I still have connections and ties there. I'm staying on the board for the Nevada Museum of Art, and the museum is something I'll obviously stay involved with.

What impact do you think you had on the arts in Las Vegas?

I don't know. I know I did a lot of projects there. Some things I feel were overlooked when I felt they should have been noticed, like the Turrell show I did over on Main Street. Our biggest



Her first local show was prints by Ed Ruscha

challenge (in Las Vegas) was that we didn't get exposed to these things, and just being exposed to things opens your mind to understanding them. And maybe you like it and maybe you don't. That's fine, but it made sense at the time to just challenge everything and bring good work. It doesn't matter if they understand it or not. That was always my focus, baby steps. Here you go, here's the best of the best. It was mildly disappointing when people wouldn't even try to engage with it.

Was that common?

I did some pretty cool shows there, and I feel like nobody saw them. My first show was one of the most comprehensive Ed Ruscha print shows, and we didn't sell one piece. We had 500 people that night. Nobody purchased anything. It's frustrating when you know you had your hands on these things at one point, and it was kind of not really appreciated.

Do you think arts audiences have grown since then?

Do I think people know Ruscha now? Probably. Growing up in Las Vegas, I never got to see a Rauschenberg or Ruscha. The exposure alone is a start. It's one of the things I'd hoped for, in coming back.

Things have obviously changed. What have you noticed?

The artists are much stronger now than they were probably 15 years ago, in terms of the talent and the creativity, the variety of the work. There are more local artists there than when I first arrived. There were three or four when I first got there. Now it's 15, 20, if not more. It's quadrupled, and I think that's a testament to the community.

How would you assess the state of the arts here?

There isn't much exhibit space. It always comes down to the fact that it's an industry. They have to be able to sell work in order to survive. But the museum is in a strong position to move forward. As long as they continue to push that effort, and even do projects as they're developing, the museum is going to give a lot of energy to the community, whether it's educational programs or lectures or exhibitions like Tilting again. Those are things that will continue to elevate what we've been doing. Because the artists are there, it will continue to grow.

With the struggles Las Vegas has had in terms of art museums over the decades, how optimistic are you that the conditions are right for the museum now?

The synergies behind it are all in the right place. We have land. We have money. We have the city on board, we have the state on board, and we have an institution involved. We are no longer serving on two boards. We are one institution, the Nevada Museum of Art. The state supporting it is a huge first step, a first time for an art museum in Las Vegas. All the things that led up to this, all of this that built up to where we are now, all of that had to happen. The ups and downs, the failures and successes, all that happened. You couldn't just leapfrog and be here.



Work by Erik Beehn was among her last.

Among the collectors who are now investing in high-end works, are they also collecting from this market?

They're doing both. They're buying local artists and buying blue-chip work. They're very quiet about it. Is it enough to support a gallery network? No. But it will continue to grow as the educational process grows, especially with the museum and its programs. With a museum, both adults and children are being exposed to the arts without the pressure to buy. It's there to look at, to learn about. It provides an open door.

Enough to someday sustain galleries?

Sustainability is different. In this market you have to be really diverse. There's such a global marketplace. These independent galleries are closing. Many galleries are selling mostly secondary market in the back room. I was not tied down to one thing. I could consult. I could give shows. I could be more flexible. It's not enough (to be a gallery). We don't have the buying power. Las Vegas has the interest level and passion, but \$5,000 is a threshold there. I was doing public projects all over the country. Ninety percent of my business was outside of Las Vegas. Or the big collectors were going global.

The difference with many collectors in Las Vegas, and I think it surprises people, is that when someone asks for access to a collection, or a tour, everyone is much more reticent there to open their doors. I get asked, "Can you get them in?" It could be museum trustees, touring groups, art professionals. It's educational. People like to share. It teaches people how collecting can happen, how different it can be across the board. But we just don't have that happening in Las Vegas. It's not meant as a detriment. It's just different.

What is the status of the Smart Initiative with Steven Molasky?

It's been completely shelved, mostly for financial reasons, because Steven had to move in another direction with some of the real estate, and I was unable to raise because of my focus on the museum and my business. We were about to start fundraising October 1. The timing was tough.

The art scene had some contentious years. Even you took some harsh comments. How was that for you?

I took a few punches, but at the end of the day I knew what I was doing was right. Growing up, I always wanted to see something happen there. Just trying to keep people looking is the biggest key. No matter where you go, you get into some sort of a political minefield. For a while there was a lot of negativity (in the arts scene). I think it's back to a positive space. The drama, the negativity, the taking sides, and the bickering was a huge turnoff for a while, but I feel like it's ended. There's a lot more positivity. I think everyone finally turned around and rolled their sleeves



Richard Long's Earth

up and said, We've just got to do it. No one's going to do it for us. And that's the attitude we all have to take.

I want people to really understand how much I did care about what was going on there. It was so personal, something that was kind of a life goal and that meant a lot to me. Tilting was really personally great for me. It gave me a chance to really look at what was going on around me and not be so global, but much more local in my perspective, and see the amazing work that is happening there. And CityCenter, hands down, was a life experience. To say that CityCenter was my baby, that's a pretty good life.

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