

Richard Serra, Freddie King 1999 Colour Etching

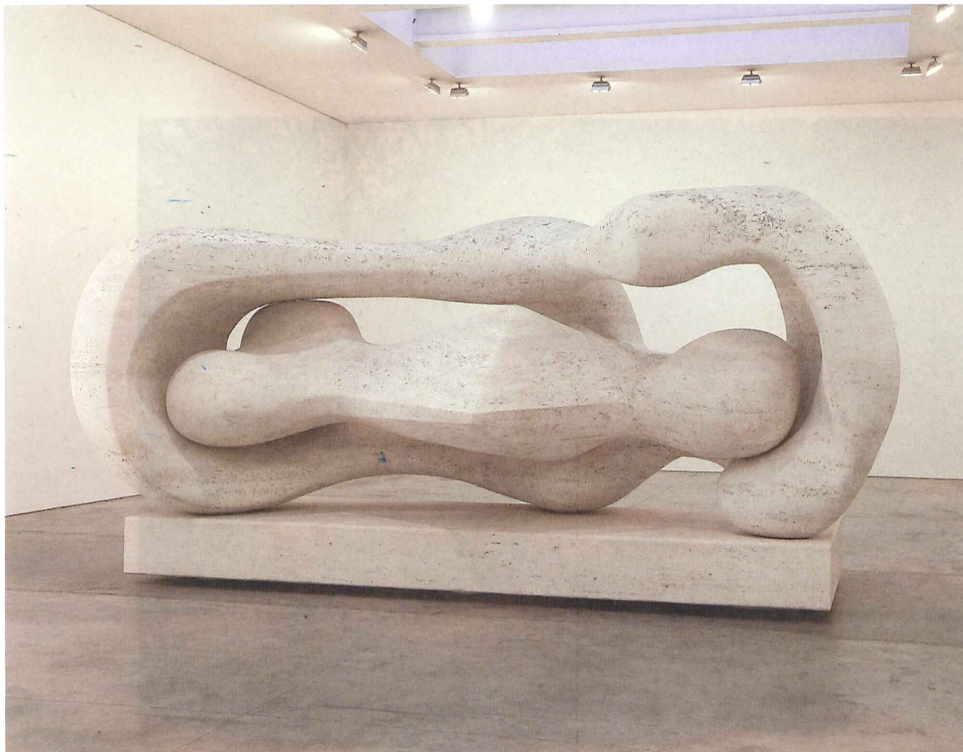
Art Thrives in the Desert

By Mark Ellwood

TEN YEARS AGO, THE CONTEMPORARY ART MOVEMENT WAS NON-EXISTENT IN LAS VEGAS. TODAY IT FIGURES STRONGLY IN MANY COLLECTIONS LARGELY DUE TO ART CONSULTANT MICHELE QUINN

Driving around the gentrified sections of Las Vegas's historic downtown, many of the rehabilitated, snug bungalows — most of them built in the city's golden era — have now been co-opted by doctors and lawyers. One, though, stands out, ironically, precisely because there is no perky, business-chasing sign staked in its front yard. But the low-key façade is misleading, because behind these whitewashed walls sits a powerhouse local force: these are the chic, understated offices of MCQ Fine Art, the advisory service founded and run by Michele C Quinn. And in Las Vegas, as far as contemporary art is concerned, it's Quinn who is its tastemaking, influence-wielding fairy godmother.

Petite, put together and with a champagne bubble laugh, Quinn might seem an unlikely art world kingmaker. Born to a prominent local family, she departed for the requisite stint in New York at a young age — interning with Leo Castelli before landing a job as a print specialist at Chris-



CityCenter_HenryMoore Reclining Connected Forms

tie's and director of multiples and prints at mainstay Brooke Alexander Gallery. But after 11 years on the East Coast, she was lured back home to Las Vegas where she set herself up as an independent advisor. At a cocktail party, Quinn met Glenn Schaeffer, then-President of the Mandalay Resort Group. It was a career — and life-defining moment.

"Glenn's kind of a maverick in a very entrepreneurial way, a big thinker and a high energy businessman," Quinn explains. After she gave him some smart advice on his minimalist-leaning holdings — her expertise in this area was well honed in New York at Brooke Alexander's contemporary art gallery — Schaeffer asked her to open a gallery in his new project, the boutique mold-breaker, THEHotel.

"We opened with what I think was a phenomenal Ed Ruscha show, a 30-year history of prints up on the wall," she recalls, "Nobody knew what it was, nobody saw it. It was a rude awakening, pretty much a smack in the face. Anywhere else in the world it would have sold out in seconds."

Despite this first set back, the irrepressible Quinn persevered, tweaking her New York know-how for the Vegas market, offering editioned, cheaper works or splashier names for easy recognition. For three years, she masterminded this space with Schaeffer's support — that is, until the massive City Center project appeared.

This \$8 billion project, set to open in December 2009 is the largest ever undertaken in Las Vegas, and owners MGM-Mirage decided that contemporary art would be a crucial counterpoint to the buildings designed by notable architects, the likes of Cesar Pelli and Norman Foster, that dot the complex. Quinn's background — local knowledge, art world credibility and smart populist touch — made her the ideal *czarina* for the project. Soon she was handed a \$40 million budget to source, produce and install art works across the sprawling, 67-acre complex the mixed-use facilities of which range from a 4,000-room resort to 2,400 luxury residences and a 500,000 square foot retail mall. Over the past four years, Quinn has shepherded the selection, design, production and installation of 15 pieces, many of them site-specific, from some of contemporary art's toniest names: a blipping electronic installation from

Jenny Holzer that will scroll for 280 feet across the resort's wall, two organic mud drawings from Richard Long, each measuring 80 feet by 50 feet, to adorn one of the residential buildings and even an 84-foot long silver replica of the Colorado River cast by Maya Lin that will dangle above the hotel's reception area.

Jim Murren, MGM-Mirage's art-loving Chairman and CEO, was one of Quinn's early champions and remains a fierce fan. "What Michele is particularly good at is logistics," he explains, "When you formulate a collection like this, some of the works are extraordinarily complicated — all the commissioned pieces had to be integrated into construction. How we navigate the desires of artists and architects in that physical space is a logistics challenge."

Las Vegas' location complicated the situation even more, mostly thanks to its blisteringly hot weather and relentless sunshine: the massive outdoor sculpture by Nancy Rubins, featuring her signature boats, had to be made out of aluminium instead of the original fiberglass to avoid any risk of sun damage, or even of it melting in the heat. However, Quinn is refreshingly pragmatic when it comes to public art like this, explaining "We have to deal with such an extreme mass quantity of people, and think about everything — like, what if a drink spills on the piece, what happens to that?"

Murren concurs. "She has a very practical sense about what will work on a large scale — I think that's a unique skill. When I came up with the idea of City Center, at the very beginning of the concept... contemporary art was going to be a very big part of it, and she helped me."

But while Quinn has been toiling full-time for the last four years on the City Center project, she has still found time to maintain her previous commitments — notably, as *consigliere* to many of the contemporary collectors in Las Vegas, Murren included. "When I think about contemporary art, there are only a handful of people from whom I'd seek some advice, and Michele is one of them," he confides.

As a private collector, former art history major and amateur artist himself, that's no small compliment. "I think the fact that she grew up here and knows the community, and a lot of the patrons, is very important." So, too, is her attentive aftercare once a



sale is made. “I’ve built a strong business model of collection management,” Quinn explains, “I see a shortfall in the art world where galleries sell works to people but there is such a disconnect once the piece has been shipped, no follow through and long-term care. The poor collectors have these massive things dumped on their doorstep and don’t know what to do. They’re using the wrong framers, shippers, installers — they might have the same people who install their curtain rods installing their art,” she says, “That’s been a whole other half of what I’ve been doing for my private collectors.”

Such a hands-on attentiveness is what has kept wealthy collectors like Murren so loyal; Quinn has squired him and his wife around art fairs scouting for smart acquisitions. But Quinn hasn’t neglected her own collection either. “I was lucky to get a few pieces as bonuses when I started working and from there I would buy one piece a year. I would spend maybe \$500 or \$1,000 — I never had more than that starting out,” she admits.

Trained in the prints world, Quinn has acquired a quietly impressive stash of works on paper, from art world rockstars like Richard Serra, to local Vegas names such as David Ryan and JW Caldwell. One of her favorite pieces, though, is a pastel by painter Tim Bavington.

British-born Bavington has lived in Las Vegas for 16 years and is a well-known figure in New York,



THEhotel_MandalayBay



THEhotel_MandalayBay

producing smart yet poppy paintings in dayglo colors. He hadn’t considered a local show until Quinn pushed him. “It was one of the most successful shows in the history of Las Vegas. The entire show sold out,” she laughs. It was Quinn’s background in multiples and more moderately tagged pieces, that helped her steer the blue chip-priced Bavington into producing some more accessible works on paper. It was ideal for the local market and for Quinn herself, who quickly snapped one up.

“As a supporter of my work, her endorsement in town has helped me,” Bavington says, “She’s very hard working, and tenacious. She’s been the person that’s been motivated to bring art here — getting this town to appreciate Richard Serra or Maya Lin is no easy task. But she initiated the appreciation of contemporary art amongst the casino owners and people in Las Vegas. She changed the place.”

Quinn continues to marshal locals around her, coordinating the Modern Council group for the Bellagio to introduce budding collectors not only to artists, but also to each other. It’s entertainment and education combined, thanks to Quinn’s unstuffy, celebratory approach to collecting in all its forms and budgets. “I enjoy introducing people to the collections around, showing them what’s here — I have one collector who has probably one of the most impressive classic car collections in the country. It rivals Jay Leno’s and is incredible.”

Her latest project emphasises exactly that inclusiveness. She’s returning to her Vegas roots, when she ran a gallery for Glenn Schaffer. This time, she’s opening an art and design space at the heart of City Center called CenterPiece this December. Quinn will curate the inventory, focusing on multiples and architect or artist-designed objects from the likes of New York’s Artware editions; her aim is that nothing will cost more than \$10,000. It’s likely to become a Las Vegas landmark, selling souvenirs for the smart set — instead of taking home a T-shirt, why not snap up a Richard Long print after enjoying his mud installation across the street? Certainly, that will likely be the outcome if Quinn’s hopes prove well founded. “People need to understand that art is a part of life, they can enjoy it on any level and don’t have to have millions of dollars to do so.”