



Art Meets Architecture: Profile

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Step into the Fine Arts Building in Downtown Los Angeles and you step back into an era when art and architecture merged with breathtaking panache. A landmark Romanesque Revival hidden gem, the building was constructed in 1926 to house the studios of local Downtown Los Angeles artists. Remarkably, the tradition lives on thanks to curator Lisa Ames and her husband Mark who run Art Meets Architecture, a curatorial initiative that has become a mainstay of Downtown's historical heritage. Their motto: "Presenting 21st century art in extraordinary architectural settings."



Lisa and Mark Ames in the lobby of the Fine Arts Building. Photo by Lucy Birmingham.

Lisa, a former preschool art teacher and Mark, a building design consultant, moved to the Historic Core of Los Angeles in 2007, after widely exploring the area's classic architecture and burgeoning art scene. "We first discovered everything we could about Downtown, and often during the Downtown Los Angeles Art Walks," says Lisa. "We ended up moving into a loft at the Eastern Columbia building, an Art Deco landmark that's within walking distance of the area's extraordinary architecture, like the Fine Arts Building."

Lisa's tenure as curator for the 17 showcases in the Fine Arts Building lobby began in 2010. "It started with a simple question" she says. "What do artists need most? The opportunity to showcase their work." Earlier that year she had discovered the work of painters/sculptors Raffi Musakhanyan and his son, Argishti Musakhanyan, during a Downtown Los Angeles Art Walk. "Their work was fantastic. Surreal. We couldn't stop talking about it. So, the next day we decided to cross over the line from going to see art, collecting art, enjoying art and telling people about it, to actually exhibiting artists' work. Our first show was with Raffi and Argishti at the Fine Arts Building." She adds, "These two artists changed my life."



The Romanesque Revival interior of the Fine Arts Building lobby. Photo by Mark A. Vieira.

In mid-2010, Mark was commissioned to work in San Francisco and the couple took up temporary residence in a hotel while keeping their loft in Downtown LA. The move was serendipitous. "The hotel happened to be next door to the 1921 Cadillac showroom [Don Lee Building] at 1000 Van Ness Avenue which we both agreed was a to-die-for building," says Mark. The San Francisco landmark building, on the National Register of Historic Places, seemed the perfect venue for the couple to hold another Musakhanyan father and son show. "We took a leap of faith and leased the 3900 square foot historic showroom," says Lisa. The Musakhanyans' show was a hit and continued for five months. "That's when our concept for Art Meets Architecture was born," she explains.

In late 2010, with successful exhibitions under their belt, the couple expanded their reach further. "As soon as we were finished in San Francisco I approached the owners of the retail space in our Eastern Columbia building in Downtown about showing the Musakhanyans' work," says Lisa. "They loved the idea." By 2013, the couple was juggling exhibitions at six different spaces simultaneously.

During this period, they also transformed their loft into a private, gallery-like space called The Salon. Guests were invited to meet the artists whose works were on display. "I would bring smaller portions of the shows that I had at the Fine Arts Building as a way to extend that experience," says Lisa. "It's so personal when you work with artists, that actually having a chance to live with a collection of their work was amazing."

Their relationship with the Fine Arts Building deepened in 2015 when they were introduced to Priscilla Schwarz, the granddaughter of Burt W. Johnson (1890-1927) who created the exterior cast stone reliefs and interior bronze sculptures that decorate the building. These include three child figures placed in the lobby's fountain, which were modeled after Johnson's children. Titled, *The High Note Fountain*, there is a boy playing a flute and two girls each holding a fish. "The boy is Priscilla's uncle, and the girl is her mother, who is still alive," explains Lisa. "Her mother remembers when she was about four years old posing in the studio for her father."



The Fine Arts Building, home to Johnson's 1926 exterior and interior sculptures. Photo by Priscilla Schwarz.

Lisa curated Priscilla's show at the Fine Arts Building in 2016, highlighting Johnson's work there during the 1920s. Lisa recalls an emotional moment at the exhibition opening: "Sadly, Burt W. Johnson had a weak heart and passed away in 1927 when he was only 37 years old. It was just months after the Fine Arts Building opened in 1926. He was at the height of his career. And for the longest time, I couldn't tell that story without getting all teary eyed. Because there was his granddaughter Priscilla, who had never met him, 90 years later, celebrating his legacy with her own historical exhibition about him."

Lisa went on to also curate an exhibition in the Fine Arts Building of works in marble by Priscilla's brother Casey. "Casey also didn't know his grandfather, but he inherited his sculpting tools and then became a sculptor himself. It's just extraordinary isn't it?"

It was also in 2015 that the Ameses learned about World Art Day when exhibiting the works of French photographer Marie-Pierre Desaizé. "She was an ambassador of the organization, and suggested we participate," explains Lisa. "I said to her, 'World Art Day! Who doesn't love that idea? Yes, we want to be a part of it.'"

World Art Day was established by the **International Association of Art (IAA)** in partnership with UNESCO to "promote international collaboration through art." Leonardo da Vinci's birthday on April 15 was chosen as the date for the annual event, and the first World Art Day was held in 2012. The origins of the IAA go back to 1948 with concerns over artists' freedom and safety in various countries. The first official Assembly was held in 1954 with 18 countries taking part, and observers from another 22 countries. Artists influencing the formation of this important NGO included Miro, Braque, Delaunay, Vasarely, Pasmore, and Calder, among many others.

After Marie-Pierre's suggestion, the Ameses quickly approached Downtown Los Angeles Art Walk Executive Director Kathryn Brehm and Nat George, Director of Curation and Special Projects, about joining the event. They immediately rallied interest from local galleries participating in the monthly Art Walk. Through their combined efforts, and Marie-Pierre's exhibition at the Fine Arts Building, Los Angeles became the first city to host a World Art Day celebration in the United States on April 15, 2015. This was followed by the formation of the first official U.S. Chapter of the IAA in 2017.

This year, with articles of incorporation in hand, IAA/USA is seeking professional artists across the United States to become members. The goal is to widen interest in World Art Day nationally, and to offer a range of support and opportunities to U.S. artists. Their plans include dividing the country into five regions, each with a representative chapter.



Stefano Panichi, "Flux 57" (blue painting in row of paintings); 55 x 31 inches. Oil and acrylic on canvas (2018/2019). Photo by Lucy Birmingham.

The Amesese moved out of their Downtown loft last year to be closer to family, but Lisa continues to curate two-month-long exhibitions and other cultural happenings at the Fine Arts Building. As part of Art Meets Architecture's programming, she invites one or two curators every year. Now on view until June 9th is "The Essence" exhibition, with captivating paintings by Italian artist Stefano Panichi organized by guest curator Anna Dusi. "We worked together on this project for about one year, to create an international exhibit timed with World Art Day," explains Lisa. If you haven't yet experienced this Downtown treasure with its amazing architecture and art, now is the time, she adds. The Lobby of the Fine Arts Building is open to the public 8am-8pm daily.



Stefano Panichi, "Flux 33", 66.5 x 27 inches. Oil and acrylic on canvas (2018/2019). Photo by Lucy Birmingham.