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VCU hosts a sneak peek of the Institute for Contemporary Art, slated to open in October

By K. BURNELL EVANS Richmond Times-Dispatch Apr 25, 2017



Freiman



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The curves and planes of the Institute for Contemporary Art hummed with the whirring and grinding of progress and excited chatter on Tuesday, 185 days before opening festivities are set to begin.

The soaring glass walls, fountain, reflection pool and 240-seat auditorium all are beginning to take shape. So, too, are plans for what the \$41 million privately funded project will hold, and reflect.

"This is a special moment for our city, which has a thriving cultural scene that goes beyond the visual arts," said the institute's inaugural director, Lisa D. Freiman.

Museum officials detailed not only the building's physical elements but the thought behind them Tuesday at a sneak peek heading into the final stretch before its doors open to the public Oct. 28.

Where once was a wood-framed train station, a car dealership, and then an empty lot, the transparent walls of the 41,000-square-foot building now soar.

The two entrances — one facing VCU's Monroe Park campus and the other the intersection of Belvidere and Broad streets — signal the institute's openness and embrace of the campus and community, officials said.

The project was designed by New York-based Steven Holl Architects and is being overseen by the local architectural firm BCWH. The complexity of the project is enormous but also rewarding, said Charles D. Piper, principal at BCWH.

"It's as if the energy of the intersection threw itself up into the twisting shoulders and forms of the shape," Piper said. "It invites entry, pre-exploration and reflection."

Passersby will be able to see straight into the heart of the building, in a nod to its intended purpose of inviting discussion about the central issues of the day.

In this vein, the institute's inaugural exhibition, underwritten by Altria and the National Endowment for the Arts, is entitled "Declaration," a broad range of media exploring themes such as protest and resistance, choice and agency, attention and reflection, and the power of diverse communities.

Among the planned components: Paul Rucker's "Birth of a Nation," a project that recast Klu Klux Klan robes in Kente, satin, camouflage and other fabrics; "You Belong Here," a piece in neon from the Bahamian artist Tavares Strachan; and a series from Detroit-based artist Amos Paul Kennedy Jr. that draws on conversations happening in local barbershops and salons.

"It's a promissory note for the kind of institution we want to be," Chief Curator Stephanie Smith said of the institute's inaugural exhibit.

The institute will not purchase art to keep, but rather seeks to use the work of living artists to foster dialogue about the critical issues of the day.

Museum workers already are engaging the public in discussion. A series of what the institute has dubbed radical listening sessions designed to explore how the institute can be a catalyst for community conversations is underway. Past meetings have veered into fraught subjects such as race and equity.

The next session is scheduled to take place from 5:30 to 7 p.m. May 11 at the Gelman Room of the Richmond Public Library's main branch.

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PHOTOS: Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU
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