

SF WEEKLY

December 16, 2014

Museum of the African Diaspora's Rebirth: Q&A with MoAD Director Linda Harrison

Posted By [David L. Garcia](#) on Mon, Dec 15, 2014 at 11:41 AM



Following an extensive six-month \$1.3 million renovation, the Museum of African Diaspora has reopened. Since its grand opening in 2005, the museum has become an important place on Mission — the museum is the only one in the City, and one of the few in the country, that offers visitors the opportunity to learn about the African Diaspora: the migration of African people and their lasting cultural and historical impact.

The remodel has allowed for a larger exhibition space — in an attempt to guide the museum away from offering (primarily) temporary shows. By gaining more permanent exhibits, the museum is working to aligning itself with that of a fine arts museum (as opposed to a gallery space or exhibition hall). The museum is also now officially a Smithsonian Affiliate, allowing it access to the Smithsonian Institute's vast array of resources, including its unmatched artifact collection, which houses 136-million cultural and historical artifacts.

We caught up with the Museum's Executive Director, Linda Harrison, during the museum's busy re-opening week, to find out what changes have transformed MoAD, and what responsibilities it had moving forward.

What does Diaspora mean in the context of the museum? How would you define it?

Well, our focus is the African Diaspora, and that's the lens through which we look at how we develop our exhibitions, public programs, and our education workshops. Simply put, for us, the diaspora is a migration of a people, from their homeland. That's the simplest explanation.

We really want people to understand what that diaspora is. Everyone can relate to the migration of a people from their homeland. Now, in the case of the original diaspora, that's the migration of slaves, being forced to migrate. But then you have the modern diaspora, where here in the US, the migration from the South to the North. And contemporary diaspora... Have you moved [here] from some place [else]?

Yes, I did. I'm from Los Angeles.

Okay! So, you were born and raised in Los Angeles, and you've now migrated to San Francisco, and you're adapting and transforming. As a museum of the African Diaspora, we're looking at then how we share more stories, information, and art with the lens of the African Diaspora.

What would you say makes the museum unique in San Francisco?

When you come here you're going to see how we focus on the *various* diasporas. Artists who are Afro-Cuban, Afro-Asian, Afro-Brazilian, Afro-Caribbean, or African-American. And sometimes these are artists that you may or may not have seen, and we want to make sure that they are a part of the conversation.

How has your recent renovation changed, or hopefully improved, the museum?

There's a couple big takeaways. We reimagined the ground floor, so that we would be more inviting to the public, so that they can see in, we can see out. We hope that our visitors will find it a more engaging and interactive experience. We now have iPad stations on the ground floor, so you can go deeper into the Diaspora, in terms of a historical context. We've reimagined our shop.

And I think probably one of the important aspects is that we've expanded our exhibition space. Previously we could only mount one exhibition, and now we can show three to four exhibitions. Right now we have three: *Lava Thomas: Beyond*, a local artist, her studio is in Berkeley. Wonderful show about women in the art space, particularly African-American women. We have *Drapetomania*, our national show, and then we have our Emerging Artist Gallery, which now has images from our archive [on view]. Moving forward we will be featuring emerging artists from here in the Bay Area.

Would you say that the museum is largely a historical one, or is there something else you'd like to

define it as?

I believe that that is what people thought it was. Although we'll give you a very rich context of the history regarding the African Diaspora, we're not a history museum. We are an art museum. We have rotating exhibitions, we have public programs to support those exhibitions. They could be scholarly voices, authors in conversation, films, dance, music, all associated with the exhibitions. And our ultimate goal is to become really become a collecting museum. We've spent the last six months going through the rigors process of finally becoming a formal affiliate of the Smithsonian.

What do you think is the role of the museum in addressing very current issues of identity and race?

Well, I think that this is what is exciting about a museum in 2014, in the 21st century. We constantly must strive to be relevant, and I believe our role, here at MoAD, is to become the hub for the conversations about race and culture. Particularly because the contemporary diaspora, folks in the diaspora are creating another fabric, another flavor of the culture.

Do you feel that the Museum has any responsibility to address recent events such as the Ferguson ruling, or the similar case of Eric Garner in New York? Is there any responsibility to take a stance?

I believe that, at the end of the day, art and social justice are really one and the same. So we do have a responsibility to talk about it. It can be as simple as a conversation here in our Salon.

What are the museum's plans for the future? Is there anything on the agenda or are you just celebrating your big improvements?

Well, we *are* celebrating our improvements and the extension of our gallery space, but we are also looking at collaborating with SFMOMA, on a show *Portraits and Other Likenesses*. That's already slated for 2015. We'll have Elizabeth Catlett, I believe that show starts in January. We're already planning our exhibitions schedules. We want to be proactive, we want to be intentional, we want to be vibrant, because we are downtown, right here in the Yerba Buena Center, with various other museums. We want to make sure that we're engaging in the type of programming that really makes it fun to be here.

Museum of African Dispora, 685 Mission (at Third Street).

<http://www.sfweekly.com/exhibitionist/2014/12/15/museum-of-the-african-diasporas-rebirth-qanda-with-moad-director-linda-harrison>