



A new angle on art: The Denver Art Museum's \$110 million Frederic C. Hamilton Building, designed by Daniel Libeskind, has become a structural landmark for the city since opening last fall. "It started out as an expansion for the museum, but then it grew into something much more ambitious," says museum director Lewis Sharp.

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Denver's art scene soars with new galleries, events

By Gene Sloan, USA TODAY

DENVER — Clark Richert recalls the cultural wasteland that was Denver in the 1960s when he arrived from Kansas City.

"I basically went into shock when I walked into the Denver Art Museum," says the 66-year-old artist, sometimes called the godfather of Colorado contemporary art. "It really was almost non-existent when compared to the (art museum) in Kansas City."

Lounging at the back of Denver's well-known Rule Gallery, which is showing his work through early November, Richert says that for a while, there was only one gallery in Denver exhibiting contemporary art — a pretty pathetic showing for one of the biggest cities between Chicago and Los Angeles.

"When we wanted to see art, we'd go to Colorado Springs," Richert says, chuckling.

How things have changed.

Not only is the gallery scene exploding — witness the crowd of gallery hoppers milling about Richert's large-scale geometric paintings — but this weekend brings the opening of Denver's much-awaited new Museum of Contemporary Art, a \$15.5 million showplace for cutting-edge international works that already is drawing national attention. And it's just the latest major cultural landmark to make its debut in the fast-growing city, which suddenly finds itself on the map for more than just its sports teams.

Watch out, Santa Fe. There's a new art mecca taking shape in the Rockies.

"We may not have the critical mass of a New York or Los Angeles," says Lewis Sharp, the longtime director of the Denver Art Museum, as he leads a visitor through its much-ballyhooed, \$110 million building that opened last October. "But it really is remarkable what is happening here."

Sharp is eager to show off the striking new structure, designed by international architecture star Daniel Libeskind — an explosion of angled, titanium-clad shapes that dominates the south side of town.

Like Frank Gehry's swirling Guggenheim Bilbao museum in Spain, the sculpturelike construction is an instant icon for the city — and one that many hope will spawn a similar surge in cultural tourists (the so-called "Bilbao effect").

"It started out as an expansion for the museum, but then it grew into something much more ambitious," says Sharp, pausing in one of the building's oddly angled galleries, which have drawn praise as well as scathing criticism. (*The New York Times* called them "tortured geometries" that make it "virtually impossible to enjoy the art.")

The Libeskind building sits next to an older museum building designed by Italy's Gio Ponti and across from the Michael Graves-designed Public Library — a triumvirate of star power sure to get an architecture lover's heart racing.

But Libeskind's building, his first completed in the USA (he also designed the still-in-the-works Freedom Tower at the World Trade Center site in New York), also is notable for what it holds. The museum has long been known for its collections of American Indian, Spanish Colonial and pre-Columbian art and now has room to show off its collections of modern and contemporary art.

Two soaring new floors of 20th-century works by the likes of Roy Lichtenstein and Ed Ruscha are as impressive as any west of the Mississippi River and an unexpected cultural find for visitors who have come to the Mile High City expecting little more than Western-themed historic sites such as Buffalo Bill's gravesite and the Victorian home of "unsinkable" Molly Brown.

Sharp goes even further. "You can go anywhere in the world, and you won't find a room with a better collection of abstract expressionism than you see here," he says, walking

Smaller venues flourish, too

Denver's art cred also is getting a boost from the blossoming of several smaller institutions, such as the year-old Laboratory of Art and Ideas in Belmar, a venue for short-term contemporary art installations, and the 4-year-old Kirkland Museum, nationally known for its jam-packed collection of 20th-century furniture and design by the likes of Ponti, Paul Evans and Alvar Aalto.



Please don't feed the art: The Dikeou Collection houses a giant pink inflatable bunny by Momoyo Torimitsu. Curator Devon Dikeou also features contemporary works by Vik Muniz and other star artists in the collection.

Visitors also are discovering the Dikeou Collection, a little-known jewel that opened in 2003 in a downtown building. Curated by Denver-born, New York-based artist Devon Dikeou, it houses a spectacular array of cutting-edge contemporary works by Momoyo Torimitsu, Vik Muniz and other stars — not the sort of thing one expects in the USA's 21st largest metropolitan area (pop. 2.6 million).

Standing between two of the collection's best-known pieces, a pair of giant pink inflatable bunnies by Torimitsu, Dikeou says the looming arrival of the Libeskind building, in the works for years, pushed the art scene forward.

"It's like when you ski with better skiers, you get better," Dikeou says. "I think it really inspired the city to reinvent itself."

One of the biggest reinventions has taken place in the gallery scene, particularly the monthly First Friday art walks, which have morphed into citywide to-do's since they began five years ago. During the event earlier this month, an almost unmanageable 5,000 people turned out on Santa Fe Drive, the city's densest gallery area, packing the sidewalks and spilling into the street. Some showed up in fantastical costumes, from pirate outfits to medieval garb to monkey suits, resulting in a surreal, Carnival-like atmosphere. One artist drove a motorized alligator sculpture down the street, flames shooting from its rear.

"It's a grass-roots social event," says Jack Pappalardo, owner of Habitat Gallery, where it was so crowded, one could hardly move. "It wasn't planned."

This month's First Friday coincided with the city's first Arts Week, a celebration that included events at more than a dozen museums and performing arts venues — yet another sign of the city's growing gusto for the arts.

Becoming 'a fun place'

Denver, of course, is no New York. Its offerings still are modest compared with the major art meccas on both coasts. But Pappalardo, who came to Denver five years ago after living in New York, Toronto and Atlanta, says he never has seen a scene take off quite like here. "In Atlanta, you'd never get 5,000 people out unless it's a football game," he says.

Even before the art scene started to soar in recent years, the city had begun to transform. Its downtown is in the midst of a decade-long comeback, fueled in part by the emergence of the now-vibrant LoDo entertainment district.

The roots of Denver's cultural emergence go back as far as 1988, when voters in

the city and surrounding counties passed a 0.1% sales tax to fund cultural organizations, something that is rare in major cities. The Scientific & Cultural Facilities District tax raises \$40 million a year for local art, music, theater and dance organizations, and natural and cultural history sites.

Many also credit popular two-term mayor John Hickenlooper, who has supported the arts at every turn. The onetime brewpub owner, celebrated for helping to revive LoDo in the '90s, is unabashed in his view that world-class cultural sites make a city vibrant.

"As we put these huge investments into our cultural facilities, we have simultaneously seen the emergence of downtown as a fun place," he says, sitting in his art-filled City Hall office. "They feed on each other."

Hickenlooper is responsible for perhaps the biggest cultural coup — the announcement three years ago that Denver will become home to the Clyfford Still Museum, which will house the majority of the famed expressionist's work.

While Still had no connection to Denver, his will called for his 2,400 works to go to a U.S. city willing to build a museum for them, and Hickenlooper lobbied Still's widow to make that city Denver.

It was a multibillion-dollar cultural bonanza. A single Still painting recently went for more than \$20 million at auction. The museum, scheduled to open next to the Denver Art Museum in 2010, will have more than 800 of them and, like the new Libeskind building, could become a national destination for art lovers.

Hickenlooper says Denver is unusual among major American cities in that people move there not for jobs but for the quality of life: the nearby mountains, hiking trails, the relentlessly sunny days. They're the kind of people who expect a vigorous cultural scene, he says.

Increasingly, they're getting it.

At the new Contemporary Art Museum, which opens Sunday, executive director Cydney Payton says visitors can expect "star power" — at least, that's the name of the David Adjaye-designed museum's first show. And, indeed, it'll have works from seven international stars, from Canadian David Altmejd — darling of this summer's Venice Biennale — to Kenyan Wangechi Mutu.

"If you're an art junkie, you'll need to come to Denver just to see this show," says Payton, smiling. "Denver is (now) worth the trip."