

CULTURAL VITALITY

AT THE CAMERON



by Abby Spangél Perry

Creating a cultural gathering place is a goal of Cameron Art Museum Director Deborah Velders. Behind Velders is "Dance," 1981, by Robert Motherwell (American, 1915-1991). Acrylic on canvas, courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of Art.

photo by Lori Harris

Deborah Velders has spent her life advocating for the arts and in the process has built an enviable resume. Prior to moving to Wilmington in 2005, she spent 20 years in Houston as the head of exhibitions and public programs at the prestigious Menil Collection, an internationally recognized museum. Seeking to expand her skills and experience, she stepped away from the high-profile role to take on the challenge of breathing new life into the Louise Wells Cameron Art Museum.

The museum was facing an uncertain future due to a large-scale expansion and

the untimely death of its former long term director, Ren Brown. Velders was charged with the task of elevating the museum's status regionally, but was faced with the reality of institutional shortfalls that began with the operating budget. Her first task was to spearhead a capital campaign to create an endowment to address this issue. While still working to strengthen the endowment, the museum has sought grant funding that allows for its operation.

Since taking leadership, Velders has worked hard toward the goal of making the museum a community cultural center.

Education and public programs have grown immensely, offering programs in music, dance, theatre, film, literary readings, lectures, and monthly artist talks. From “Kids@CAM” to “Connections”, a special guided tour for Alzheimer’s patients, the museum invites all ages and backgrounds to engage with art in real ways.

Velders is optimistic about what lies ahead for the Cameron, but is realistic about what is needed to survive the challenges of the recession. Like many, she feels that art is an unmediated expression of culture, and the need to express ideas and emotions is felt more poignantly in difficult times. Wilmington’s culturally rich community is what sets it apart from places similar in size and location, but it takes financial support for the institutions and creative individuals that live within the community for cultural expression to flourish.

Where do you feel the Cameron is today compared to when you started with the museum? It is a much healthier and happier organization in every respect. However, like all non-profit organizations, the museum’s very existence is a function of public support, and its future is not assured until it succeeds in raising a sufficient operating endowment. However, we are optimistic and confident that the community that has invested so deeply and passionately in building and supporting this museum will continue to do so.

What is your vision for the museum’s future? To create an extraordinary cultural gathering place: a cultural ecosystem, an intersection of art, nature and history. Toward that end, we are working to provide high quality, innovative programs in visual and performing arts; rich educational experiences for all ages, and continuing to develop our art park with nature trails, gardens, the historic civil war battle site, the working clay arts studio, outdoor sculptures and programs in music, film, dance, theater.

Wilmington is growing and changing rapidly. What growth and change do you feel needs to take place at the Cameron to keep pace? All of the area’s arts organizations, including the Cameron Art Museum, must work collectively and individually to provide support to help guide the community’s cultural identity, which in turn will fuel its economic, political, and social development. The symbiotic relationship between a community’s cultural vitality and its economic prosperity and progress has been well documented in recent years.

As leader of the museum you are also a leader in the arts. What are your thoughts about Wilmington as an arts community? Wilmington’s art community, like most communities, has virtues and deficiencies alike. There are many talented and resilient artists who choose to live and work here against great odds, in every creative discipline (theatre, film, visual art, music, and dance). There is strong theatre, film, and a growing dance presence in Wilmington, and there are

many talented leaders in this community who lend their support to furthering the arts. But challenges include frequent turnover, loss of art galleries, and the precarious condition of many non-profit organizations. We lack a strong, unified arts council or art trust to advocate for and support the arts. There is considerable inertia as people too often “settle” for inferior quality projects and standards. Excellence simply takes more effort – but that difference defines the nature and goal of art itself. It can (and should) also define the nature and identity of a community.

There has been too much divisiveness, fear, pettiness, and egotism driving the discourse and hindering positive collective action. There is much good to build upon, and both artists and art organizations must support one another’s best efforts. I believe the adage that “all ships raise with the rising tide.” ♦

Ideas for growth of the arts in Wilmington from Deborah Velders

1. Formation of a **unified, strong arts council** to act as an advocate and voice for this region.
2. Leadership in creating a unified vision and **arts identity** for this region.
3. Establishment of a “percent for art” program, bond referendums, and innovative **taxes to support high-quality art programs** and public art projects.
4. Innovative collaborations and **creative partnerships in designing projects for public buildings**, government and utility design projects, etc.
For example, artists, architects and designers could be engaged to collaborate and design unique manhole covers, public benches, bus stop shelters, sidewalk-imbedded artworks, signage and banners, bicycle racks, water fountains, public trash receptacles, lighting designs, temporary artworks in vacant buildings and storefronts, musical “soundscapes” for public spaces and special events, roadside sculpture and billboards, park topiary and temporary installations.
5. Coordinated efforts among arts organizations for a **county or city-wide art week festival**, built upon the strength of one or more existing, successful art festivals such as CUCALORUS Film Festival, UNCW’s art festival, Pedestrian Art, Art for the Masses, etc.
6. Public building projects should consider **innovative architectural designs** by notable architects and designers.
7. Coordination of publicity and **marketing of the arts** by bureaus of tourism, chambers of commerce, arts council, business coalitions, etc.
8. The airport (and other transportation hubs) should install appropriate, serious and **thoughtfully selected public artworks** in order to create the best “first impression” of our city for visitors and tourists.