



Charles Desmarais at the California Museum of Photography in Riverside. He will soon leave his post as director of the museum.

MARILYN ODELLO/The Press-Enterprise

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Special to The Press-Enterprise
Charles Desmarais has a simple reason for leaving the California Museum of Photography to become director of the Laguna Art Museum.

"There are a whole set of new challenges there. Working with a general art museum, there will be a range of new experiences, of new possibilities," he said.

"I am not just going to be near the beach," he added, smiling.

Desmarais has served as director of the photography museum — a part of the University of California, Riverside — for the past seven years, during which its staff and budget have grown substantially. He leaves his position there on Sept. 30.

The museum is scheduled to move to downtown Riverside early next year into larger quarters at the Kress Building on the Main Street mall. Desmarais says he foresees no major problems with the move. UCR is conducting a nationwide search to find a new director.

The Laguna Art Museum, a modestly sized, prestigious institution that specializes in the work of California artists, will be the first general collection museum Desmarais has directed.

Desmarais has also served as director for the Chicago Center for Contemporary Photography at Columbia College in Chicago; curator for the Friends of Photography in Carmel; editor of Exposure, a quarterly

Opportunity knocks

Charles Desmarais leaving photography museum for new challenge in Laguna

Desmarais' final On Art column for The Press-Enterprise appears on Page F-2.

publication of the Society for Photographic Education; and assistant editor for Afterimage, a monthly photographic journal.

Anne Naleid, spokesperson for the Laguna museum, said Desmarais had been selected after a nationwide search.

"We felt that he had the ability to turn us

into a really first-rate institution," she said, adding that the museum's board had been pleased with both Desmarais' experience as a museum director as well as his familiarity with the Southern California art world. She said the board believed the skills requisite for running a photography museum are easily transferable to those needed to run a general art museum.

Sheryl Conkleton, an associate curator in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's

photography department, also praised Desmarais' curatorial and directorial skills.

"He has made a very significant contribution to the museum," she said. "It has acquired a much more national profile since he's been there." Conkleton said the museum now ranks among the top several photography museums in the country.

Conkleton said she believed the photography museum would maintain its prestige. "Charles is very good at picking good people. I think the staff that he has put together will keep the museum at its current level, keep up its national reputation.

"He's brought the museum to a certain stage. It's like it's in its early adult life now — it can sustain itself now."

Conkleton said she believed the museum was an important contribution to the Riverside art community as well as to the field of photography, which is still not always taken seriously as an art form.

Although he is eager to assume his new position, Desmarais said he has some unanswered questions about the move. "My entire professional background has focused on photography," he said. "Will I miss it? I'm not going to know until I get there.

"But, long before I had applied for the job, the Laguna museum had designated photography as one of the areas that they had to concentrate on. And they have some very

(See DESMARAI, Page F-6)

Desmarais . . .

(From Page F-1)

fine collections of photographs there," he said.

"And I'll have a chance to do things there that I wouldn't here, (including) some extended uses of film and video, which we haven't done here — our proper emphasis here is on the still photograph."

Desmarais is looking forward not only to working with different media himself, but in helping the museum encourage visitors to see art in new ways.

"The Laguna Art Museum has been a leader in that area . . . shaking up people's perceptions of what a museum is, taking the museum beyond its four walls. That's very important."

One way the Laguna Art Museum has expanded its exhibition possibilities is through its satellite branch in Costa Mesa, at the South Coast Plaza mall. "It's an excellent idea, and an excellent

space. It provides a different context to see art in."

Another benefit of working in an active arts community such as Laguna Beach, Desmarais said, is competition.

"When there are other people close by you putting on exhibits of quality, it spurs you into trying to be more innovative, thinking up new ways to present art."

Desmarais said he hopes UCR's photography museum — which is supported by university funding, grants and private contributions — will develop in new directions under the next director.

"I think there will be great changes. The next person that comes here as director will make very deep changes in the museum. And that's how it should be.

"It's not good for the long-term health of a museum for it to reflect just one point of view," he said. "Of course, what you hope is that the good things you have done will be maintained and the

next person will add to that new strengths."

Desmarais speaks optimistically not only about the photography museum's future, but in general about the future of the arts in Riverside.

"It's really clear that it's changed much for the better. There have been substantial changes in the community (resulting in) greatly increased support by the public."

Desmarais cited interest in building a performing arts center, renovations to the Riverside Art Museum and discussion of a public art program as examples of increased support for the arts.

To develop the arts community further, Riverside needs a

group of active, concerned collectors and ways to educate the public that art is "not just paintings on the wall," but includes a wide variety of media and forms, some of which are highly accessible like Riverside's downtown architecture, he said.

While Desmarais is eager to explore new professional vistas, he also has more purely personal reasons for leaving: to move out of a rather limited career path.

"On a very personal level, I have one of the best jobs working in photography . . . there are three, maybe five better jobs in the country.

"At my age, at 39, you don't want to feel like you're waiting around for someone to die."

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1:00, 3:30, 6:00,
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PIPPI
LONGSTOCKINGS (G)

10:00 A.M., 12: NOON

BIG (PG)

2:00, 4:15, 6:30,
8:40, 10:45