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In his first year as director of Laguna Art Museum, Charles Desmarais has changed some of the ways the 71-year-old institution does business.

Laguna Museum Job Takes a Good Listener

In his first year as director, Charles Desmarais hears from many, and not all are happy with what he's doing

By CATHY CURTIS

I think you'll find some people around here who'll say, 'Yes, he hasn't made me happy,' " Charles Desmarais says candidly. After completing his first year as director of the Laguna Art Museum, he is sitting in his book-lined office mulling over his impact on the 71-year-old institution.

"I thought I had decent interpersonal skills, and I must have if I was hired for the job," the 40-year-old director says. "But I don't think I was hit entirely with the full impact of just how many people have a legitimate right to some say in this museum until I came here.

"There are 20 board members, but that's just the beginning of it. There are nine support councils and each of them has its own board and its own president, each of whom have deep, long-term interests in

the museum.

"Plus a staff [of 21] that's 50% larger than the staff I dealt with before" as director of the California Museum of Photography, UC Riverside, a post he held for seven years before accepting the Laguna directorship. "Plus a budget [of \$1.2 million] that's 50% larger, and which means presumably 50% more donors to the museum.

"My role is becoming more and more just listening to [everyone] and trying to . . . come out with consensus decisions that at the same time move the museum forward."

Moving the museum forward has meant changing some of the ways it does business, from revamping the computer system to abolishing the exhibitions committee of the board of trustees, which used to select exhibitions and present them to the

director for approval.

"There were systems in place that made it sometimes unclear where the board's responsibility ended and the director's responsibility started," Desmarais says. "I think we've been able to clarify a lot of that.

"There's a much more clear sense now that programming the museum really has to be done by a professional staff, a staff that's got the training. We listen to input from the board, certainly, but also from colleagues in the field, from our members, from the various support councils in the museum.

"The board is primarily responsible for policy and the fiscal stability of the museum, and the programming is pretty deeply integrated into that, so you can't really say, 'This is my area; don't get near

it. . . .' [But] in the end, as at most museums, it's the director's job to make [exhibition] decisions. At any museum worth its salt, that's where the buck does stop. Of course, if I do a lousy job at that, it's the board's job to get rid of me. . . .

"I think we've got a better understanding now, all of us, of how it is that we work together and where programming ideas should start. To be honest, there has been at times, ah, some lively discussion about how that all breaks down. . . . But we're really getting a sense, I think, that we all know where we want to go. We're in sync."

Board president Claudette Y. Shaw agrees. "Our board gave him a strong vote of confidence by voting him a bonus [in September]," she says. "For the vast majority of the board, there has never been

a problem with the programming situation."

Board and executive committee member Thomas Magill, a wholehearted supporter of Desmarais, points out that the museum was without a director "for the better part of a year" after William Otton resigned to become president of the Art Institute of Southern California in Laguna Beach.

"The staff historically has always been thin [in numbers] and, on occasion, talent-wise," Magill says. "As in any organization, the board, almost out of necessity, has to be a hands-on board. It became a habit, a tradition with certain people."

"[Desmarais] is the new guy on the block, and people are going to be feeling out their turf. . . . I'd be shocked and dismayed if there weren't [disagreements]."

One of the biggest decisions both board and director will be considering in the future is the prospect of aligning more closely with Newport Harbor Art Museum, a project that's still in a preliminary, speculative stage.

On that subject, Desmarais—who seems to favor some form of increased museum cooperation—will say only that "there are many ways in which [the museums] share interests and share constituencies, and many of our members are their members. . . . I think the relationship Kevin [Consey, former Newport Harbor director] and I created with each other—that our staffs created together—has drawn the museums much closer together even as we do different programming."

"In fact, whether the two museums are ever [merged] or not doesn't affect that fact. And they can complement each other all the better the more 'friendly' Newport gets and the more intellectually challenging the Laguna Art Museum gets. I want us always to be friendly, but I want us to be challenging."

"Challenging" is not the word an art-world observer would be likely to use in describing the Laguna museum, however. Its exhibitions tend to consist of contemporary art far from the "cutting edge" or minor historical art—like California Impressionism—presented in traditional ways that lack a critical, intellectual edge.

"Obviously, it does take a long time for us—for me and the curators I have working for me—to start having an effect on the schedule," Desmarais says carefully. (This year's shows, with one exception, were planned by Otton or former chief curator Michael McManus.)

The only thing I really had full input in," Desmarais adds, "was bringing in the David Park show [last spring]. Of course, even there, I didn't organize the show; it was organized by the Whitney [Museum of American Art in New York]. But I'm really proud of it. It was a popular exhibition, one of the most popular the museum has done . . . and I think it's a real signal that there is an audience for exhibitions that are challenging."

Desmarais also praises last spring's Mathieu Gregoire sculpture installation, last fall's Craig Stecyk "Papa Moana" installation, and the current exhibit of Stephen Glassman's sculpture (all at the museum's South Coast Plaza satellite site) as "good, solid contemporary art shows."

Next year, the Desmarais imprint will be much more evident. Among upcoming exhibits, he singles out:

■ "The Profound in the Banal: The Art of Ilene Segalove," photographic, video, audio and installation work by the young Los Angeles artist, organized by Laguna



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**Charles Desmarais,
director of the Laguna Art Museum**

Art Museum (opening April 27).

■ "Jay de Feo: Works on Paper," a 33-year survey of art by a leading Bay Area artist, organized by the University Art Museum at UC Berkeley (opening July 13).

■ "Against the Grain: Los Angeles Modernism, 1920-1956," paintings by Helen Lundeborg, Stanton MacDonald-Wright and other major figures of the era, organized by the Santa Barbara Museum of Art (also opening July 13).

Desmarais does suggest there are limits to the museum's venturesomeness, however. "The art I think is most appropriate to the public gallery situation is art that has the key to its own deciphering someplace within it," he says.

"If [the art] does get really esoteric, if it does require enormous amounts of background to really engage you, well that's great for you and great for me—or maybe it is; maybe I won't understand it. But [not for] this community, in a private museum that has an educative function as well as a preservative function."

Desmarais also reaffirms the museum's commitment to showing lesser historical California artists.

"I think there's great value in understanding where we came from artistically," he says. "That's not in any way to deny that Picasso is more important than Granville Redmond, who was painting at the same time. But that's really not a relevant question to us, at this museum."

Calling the museum's satellite gallery in South Coast Plaza "a great success," he says that "it's very exciting" to have the Performing Arts Center and South Coast Repertory nearby. But surely most viewers are shoppers, not folks bound on a cultural outing? Desmarais concedes that point but adds, "It's a very visible space.

Some other developer might give you just some back room, but the fact that this is very visible at an entry space is a real indication of how supportive [developer C.J. Segerstrom & Sons] are."

Exhibitions at the satellite gallery, which opened in 1984, will continue for at least three more years, thanks to a three-year lease extending into 1992 that Desmarais negotiated.

He says the site draws "80% higher attendance" than the main museum. The museum is unable to provide precise attendance figures for either site, however. Attendance is not taken at the satellite site, which has free admission, and until recently only paid attendance has been monitored in Laguna—leaving out tour groups and member visits.

Desmarais' first year was not a banner period for acquisitions. In fact, there were no purchases, although donors gave the museum 29 works—a miscellaneous haul that includes an etching by Paul Gauguin, an early painting by Orange County artist Vic Smith and photographs by Harry Bowers, George Hurrell and William Mortenson.

Acknowledging the museum's "financial difficulties"—its \$72,000 deficit—Desmarais says he thinks that the museum needs to be on "a firmer financial footing" before buying more art. In addition, he says he wants to see more "care and organization" of the 3,000 works the museum already owns.

Meanwhile, the museum will divest itself of works in the collection that don't fit into its purview—the art of California. Among the more important works to be sold are a print by Claes Oldenberg and a Milton Avery watercolor. Asked about the museum's large Andy Warhol print, exhibited last year, Desmarais said it hasn't yet

been given its walking papers by the board.

Other accomplishments Desmarais cites include additions to the staff and gains in fund raising. Among the newcomers are assistant curator Susan Anderson, a specialist in California historical art; Diane Sherman, curator of education; and Lynn Kirst, director of development, formerly at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where she was head of major gifts.

Kirst has begun a corporate giving program—the Corporate Council—which has 24 members who each contribute \$5,000 or more annually.

Desmarais says he has introduced "more active underwriting of exhibitions" by individuals and corporations. In addition, the level of grants is, he says, "at the highest it's ever been at the museum," with "about a quarter of a million dollars in grant applications pending" and "a little over \$75,000 in actual awards. . . . Something over \$100,000 of this [fiscal] year's budget is already raised."

A key position remains open, however. That is the curator's slot formerly occupied by McManus, who resigned from the museum in March.

"We've had over 70 applications," Desmarais says. "I've talked to a lot of people . . . but frankly I haven't found exactly the right fit."

"In one case [the person had] a specialization in an extremely narrow area, and we do need a generalist because we're a small museum. In another case the person had vast curatorial experience at a municipal museum, but we [had] concerns about their ability to interact with the public . . . [and] attract donations of works of art."

"While my primary goal is to find someone with the scholarly chops and good writing skills, good team-teaching skills, I have to at least consider another aspect of the job: attracting a constituency."

A certain edge seems to be missing in all this talk, however. In an interview shortly after Desmarais first came to the museum, he was talking about "surprises" and introducing nontraditional media. Now those words don't crop up. Has his outlook changed?

No, he says, it hasn't.

As proof, he mentions the contemporary composers series—co-sponsored with the UC Irvine School of Fine Arts—which begins Nov. 15, and a performance by artist Stephen Glassman to be held Dec. 15 at the Noguchi sculpture garden in Costa Mesa.

But he adds, "I'll grant you that there are a great many venturesome artists who are integrating theater and visual arts and that sort of thing all over the world these days. I suppose in that sense we'll never be surprising."

"I wish in today's world you could be really surprising, but how do you do that? Robert Mapplethorpe gets shown again and again and all of a sudden he's surprising because some senator doesn't like his work."

After 12 months on the job, consensus seems to be more in the forefront of his mind than aesthetic hell-raising.

"As long as I'm doing my job well, no one will feel left out," he says. "I mean, at one particular time maybe the schedule won't be exactly what someone wishes it was, but I'm betting that when someone takes a look at the whole year, they'll feel as though, given the broad [artistic parameters] of the museum, their interests were served."