



Contemporary Arts Center director Charles Desmarais with two works from the current exhibition, "Is It Art?" that continues through Aug. 25.

TERRY DUENNES/The Post

Profile:

Charles Desmarais

Born: New York City, grew up in Bridgeport, Conn.

Age: 47.

Married: Kitty Morgan, editorial director, F&W Publications Inc., magazine division; no children.

Education: Undergraduate degree Western Connecticut State, Danbury; Master of Fine Arts, State University of New York at Buffalo.

Strength: "I have an analytical mind."

Weakness: "Sometimes your strength can also be your weakness. I think I sometimes rely too much on the intellect and not enough on the heart."

Favorite non-contemporary artist: "I love Manet and am not very interested in the Impressionists because Manet was the risk-taker."

Discoveries about Cincinnati's art tastes: "I don't know if Cincinnati art lovers are all that different from people . . . in St. Louis or Kansas City. People really want to know what is going on elsewhere."

Favorite color: "The browns, reds and grays of men's clothes in the 1930s. They're subtle colors."

Behavior that irks: "Unfairness."

Pleasures away from job: "Kitty's parents have a cabin in the Eastern Sierras where we hike and run. I've tried to run in Cincinnati, but the weather here hasn't been very good — the rain."

Last arts event seen: "Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra." (June 13 premiere of Gunther Schuller's "An Arc Descending.")

Life adjustments made in Cincinnati: "We bought a home that needs lots of work — a beautiful, spectacular home designed by Carl Strauss. It had been neglected for several years so when I go home from here, I paint shelves and sand woodwork."

Healing the CAC

New director rebuilds teams

By Jerry Stein
Post staff reporter

When Charles Desmarais came to Cincinnati a little over a year ago to become director of the Contemporary Arts Center, he found the institution reeling from a series of destabilizing events.

Before Desmarais' arrival, the CAC was leaderless for six months after his predecessor, Elaine King, resigned under pressure from the board after just 16 months on the job.

But the first blow was the aftermath of the 1990 Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition.

The Mapplethorpe show, which included homo-erotic photographs, resulted in indictments on obscenity charges against the CAC and then-director Dennis Barrie. Both the center and Barrie were acquitted in a 1990 trial, but defending the charges cost over \$200,000.

Corporate support dipped when conservative companies pulled their bucks. Then, Barrie and the CAC board quarreled over programming and how much to spend on it. Barrie

was gone by June 1992. The debt stayed.

Unlike the risk-taking Barrie or the academic and controlling Ms. King, Desmarais brings a serenity to the CAC. In his office in the Mercantile Building, which features an eyebrow-window overlooking Walnut Street, he reviewed his first year in Cincinnati.

"I'm most proud of rebuilding the team in terms of the staff and board," said Desmarais, who came to Cincinnati from the Robert Gumbiner Foundation of Long Beach, Calif.

"In recent years there had been a lot of challenges at the center that were very difficult for the museum and I think it took its toll on the people.

"To be really frank, I think it was a bad marriage between the former director (Ms. King) and this institution. I'm sure it hurt everybody who was involved in the marriage. I think a lot of that has been healed.

"I would like to think I was able to bring some leadership and get people to work together as a team. . . to

at least build consensus. That has resulted in us eliminating a major deficit of \$250,000 last year," said the director who favors bow ties.

In fact, he expects to end the year in the black, perhaps even a bit ahead.

"In some management course a long time ago, I learned rather than trying to win a point if, instead, you can get the greatest number of people to at least agree that this is a reasonable course of action, you get the whole group working together.

"Without a consensus-building leader, you lose sense of your mission, energy in fund-raising and artistic acuity. I think in the past year, we have been able to bring a lot of that back."

Desmarais said before accepting the CAC directorship he did a "pretty deep study. You think you know what you're in for when you walk in the door. But if I knew this intellectually, I certainly didn't experience viscerally the kind of deep, long-term support over the years. That's the source of strength of this institution.

"I had a couple of older women in their 80s and 90s take me to lunch just a few weeks ago. One had been on the board in the early '40s," Desmarais said.



Elaine King

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CAC

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The CAC was founded in 1939.

They wanted to convey to Desmarais that "I should not get too careful. . . too staid. They said the center should be for the art of the last 10 minutes," he said.

"When you find individuals who have supported an institution for over 50 years and still believe in the mission of the institution as it was back then, that's a source of amazing strength. There are very few contemporary art museums that have that kind of support."

Desmarais pooh-poohs the idea that Cincinnati's conservatism has restricted it culturally.

"I think this town at times has been cast as conservative or intolerant — afraid of growth, afraid of change. I think the Contemporary Arts Center stands as an absolute refutation of that idea. Any city that has supported a place like the CAC since 1939 cannot be that conservative," he said.

Desmarais said there still are some problems at the CAC. "Some are purely administrative. We are in the Dark Ages in terms of the automation of our office."

The CAC recently received a \$20,000 grant from the Greater Cincinnati Foundation to automate the museum. That grant must be matched with another \$20,000 to complete the project.

Citing staff attrition related to the financial situation of the recent past, Desmarais said, "Long term, the staff needs to grow."

Along those lines, the CAC already has added a chief curator in David Brown.

Another concern for Desmarais is the definition of the institution's place in the community. Even before Mapplethorpe, "there have been times when the center took on the role of the 'bad boy,'" he said.

"Since 1939, we've played a major role as the progressive arts institution. I see that as the important, central role. That might translate into an institution that looks very different."

He said such change might entail a free-standing building or more space, but what is more important, he said, "is a place that really is identifiable as a contemporary arts center."

But Desmarais said even if the CAC remains on the second floor above Walgreen's in the Mercantile Center at 115 E. Fifth St., downtown, he wants it to be far more "visibly central to the cultural core of our community."

Desmarais would like to see a revitalization of the center's publications and CAC-organized exhibitions. "It's been a few years since our exhibitions have traveled widely," he said.

"We are working hard to raise the money ahead of time for exhibitions that will have a national, international impact. First of those is an exhibition we are doing this fall on the work of Tim Hawkinson. His first show in New York last year was the talk of the town.

"We will turn the entire space over to a single artist. That hasn't happened in a very long time."