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In the
Maker's
Hands



MODERN Magazine asked Los Angeles gallerist **Gerard O'Brien** to speak with the new director of the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD), **Glenn Adamson**. The two had a wide-ranging conversation exploring Adamson's role at the museum and discussing "the new stories that get written there."

O'Brien is the owner of two Los Angeles galleries: Reform, specializing in handcrafted modern furnishings from the mid-twentieth century, and the Landing, which shows fine art. He lectures widely on California modernism and has served as a guest curator for exhibitions outside his galleries.

Adamson became MAD's director last fall. He had most recently been head of research at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, where he mounted the 2011 exhibition *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion 1970 to 1990*. Born in Boston, Adamson was educated at Cornell and Yale, where he received a PhD. Before moving to England, he was curator of the Chipstone Foundation in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He has written or contributed to a number of books, most recently *The Invention of Craft*.

He succeeds to a museum that is much-changed in the last decade. Formerly the American Craft Museum, MAD adopted its new name and moved to Edward Durrell Stone's quirky 2 Columbus Circle building with a redesign (including a new facade) by the contemporary architect Brad Cloepfil. Though both decisions generated their share of controversy, they also had a profound impact: attendance at the museum has grown more than tenfold in the almost six years since the move to the new building to more than a half million visitors annually.

Gerard O'Brien: *So first off, how does it feel to be back in the United States?*

Glenn Adamson: Oh, I'm so happy to be here. I've been sort of a New Yorker in spirit the last twenty years. I spent a year as a volunteer intern for the museum when I was just out of college, and that was a fantastic experience, and very formative for me. It really opened my eyes to this whole world. And when at Yale, not too far away, I got to spend a lot of time in New York. So while I don't think I'd say that it was inevitable that I would be back, it definitely feels right.

GO: *Having had a history with the museum and a history with its old building, and at one time having been a critic of the new building, how are you finding being in the space? What do you see as the advantages of the new location?*

GA: Well, certainly it's a much better platform, in every sense, than the old building. All of the effort and expense were definitely worth it as far as that goes. The location is unbelievable, really. Staring out over Central Park and looking out over Broadway gives you this incredible sense of being in a

hub—just being on Columbus Circle, you feel like you're in the center of Manhattan, and by extension, at the point of focus for the whole city. It's totally changed the dynamics of the museum in terms of how much audience we can attract. And I think the building is very beautifully executed, especially on the exterior. It's an extraordinary piece of architecture from the street.

Brad Cloepfil was contending with a very difficult floor plan and the floor plate is not huge. We have about three thousand square feet per exhibition floor and that's wrapped around the elevator, so it's a difficult shape to work with. But now that I've been here, I actually think we can make a virtue of having intimate spaces where we can stage more focused encounters with the objects. There are so many places that have enormous post-industrial expanses of gallery space—Mass MOCA or DIA Beacon or the Tate Modern, and you could go on—so I think that having a smaller, more focused museum allows the visitor to have a really good visit in just a couple of hours. Would I love to have 50,000 more square feet of space to play with? Sure. Any museum director would. But actually I think we can do something

that's more bespoke in a way that's consistent with what I want to do with the museum programmatically.

GO: *One of the fascinating things about your taking this position is that you're not taking it as the head curator but as the director of the museum; but even in what you just said, you're talking like a curator. And I love that. I think it has to be a real advantage to you coming to this position with the background you have. And certainly a lot of people are curious as to why a curator is becoming a director.*

GA: Yes, though I think it's worth pointing out that most of what I did at the V and A was not curating—I really only curated one show the whole time I was there, which was *Postmodernism*, and everything else I did was administration and strategic fundraising—and a lot of teaching, which I'm not doing now.

Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) at 2 Columbus Circle, redesigned by Brad Cloepfil, 2008.

MAD's new director, Glenn Adamson, with Betty Woodman's *Balustrade Vases #5*, 1991, in MAD's permanent collection.

GO: *It's a big loss that you're not teaching.*

GA: Yes, but I get to teach through other means, I suppose. When I was in L. A., for example, I spent a day at the U.C. campus in Long Beach and got to talk to some of the students and gave a lecture for anybody who wanted to come, so there's definitely continuity there. But to answer your question: I feel that being a director includes a curatorial vision, it includes strategic fundraising, and it also means that you want to think about what a particular initiative means for the education department, for the retail activities of the museum, for the financial underpinnings of the museum. Plus, I feel like being content-led or idea-led is often a much better way for a director to have a conversation with a prospective donor. I think if a director is not

fundamentally in tune with the creative mission of the institution then you lose something. So I don't think my background is a disadvantage at all—quite the contrary. It makes my job easier, as director, to feel so comfortable with the material. And that's one of the reasons why coming here was an opportunity I really couldn't have found anywhere else, because of the nature of this particular institution and its collection, and its history and its trajectory.

GO: *Just from looking at what's on your calendar, I see that you have adopted a new axiom, championing a new noun, namely "maker," rather than getting into the old debate about craft, which I know you and I completely agree on. I think that's such an important distinction, and I'm really excited by your harnessing the power of that word.*



GA: "Maker" implies a more expansive set of options. So for me, the difference is between a late twentieth-century model, where you have a studio movement in a specific medium—ceramics, fiber, wood, metal, or glass—and obviously I'm very interested in that history and a lot of the museum's DNA is still devoted to that. But I think if you look at the contemporary framework you're looking at people more often than not who are cross-disciplinary, who are thinking about analog and digital technologies at once, who may shift from one medium to another over the course of different projects. You're thinking about collabora-



Lathe V chair designed by Sebastian Brajkovic, 2008. Bronze with embroidered upholstery.

Robert Arneson's ceramic Bust dates from 1977.

tive teams, you're probably thinking about small-batch manufacturing and other kinds of innovative solutions to production—and to me “craft” is really too narrow to describe that whole range of interests. So I like “maker” as a description of the person we're interested in here, and I do feel like I'm very interested in people and processes, not necessarily just objects.

We want to convey an engagement with active and innovative people above everything else, and I also feel that the reason to think about makers is that it brings you to things like skill and know-how, capability and adaptability, these really open-ended ideas that craft doesn't necessarily imply because craft still has this strong sense of being rooted in tradition and being somewhat rule-bound—obviously it doesn't need to be that but it does have that connotation—and I like the way that “maker” gets you away from all those things.

GO: *So the narrative is really exciting. Aren't you doing a show that's focusing on New York-area makers—can you talk a little about that?*



TOP: LASZLO REGOS PHOTO



GA: That's right, yes. It's called *NYC Makers Open*, and it's exactly what I'm talking about, realized in one project. We've chosen one hundred makers from the five boroughs to feature. One thing I think really distinguishes the project is its radical, democratic method—we selected the makers through this multi-step process in which we first asked everybody on the staff, all the way from the security guards to me, to suggest people who could nominate makers for the show. Ultimately we went out to about 350 people and asked them for suggestions and got this massive list of people to consider. After honing the list we presented it to a panel who came up with the hundred people we will actually include in the show, which opens July 1. So it's the opposite of a single curatorial authoritative vision—instead it's kind of a community enterprise. And the idea is that the show itself will have that quality of being a snapshot, or cross-section of New York City's creative culture, and the way that people are working in lots and

lots of different trades—some within institutions, like the Metropolitan Opera, or perhaps within a museum, many of them individual entrepreneurs, some who might identify as artists, some as designers, some as union tradesmen—a whole range of different people, and how they all collaborate together to create this thing called New York City.

And you know, I think one of the things it demonstrates is that making and skills are fundamental to the cultural economy of New York. But so often they're actually behind the scenes. What we want to do is give credit to those people and tell their stories. I feel like by focusing on makers we can conduct a kind of curatorial practice that is almost akin to investigative journalism—that

Aileen Osborn Webb at her potter's wheel in a photograph from the American Crafts Council Archives.

The MAD Store.



gets you behind the scenes and into the real stories of how production happens around you.

GO: *This is obviously a “now” story, the maker’s story, but the tradition of the museum is based on a historical collection and historical material, so I assume that’s still a big part of what you’re looking at in your programming, yes?*

GA: Oh, definitely. In fact, the other big initiative this year in terms of exhibitions is a project about our founder, Aileen Osborn Webb...

GO: *One of the most incredible people of the twentieth century, in my opinion...*

GA: Absolutely. Totally agree. So we’re doing a show that’s built around her legacy, which comes down to the present, and sort of asks the question, what would Mrs. Webb do if she were alive today. It allows us to track our own history but also think about what lessons it has for us now. You’ll see that coming up a lot in our programming in the future: there will be shows that extend

Jennifer Trask’s *Intrinscus*, 2010, is constructed of wood, bone, antler, and silver with gold leaf.

Wafrika by Serge Mouangue, 2008, part of MAD’s *Global Africa Project* exhibition of 2010.

the whole chronology of our institution, which is to say essentially from after World War II, when Webb started founding her various organizations like America House and the American Craft Council...

GO: *It’s funny that you brought up America House because I would love nothing more than to see something like that return. Is there space for something like that in your current building?*

GA: I have thought about that a lot. In fact, one of the original concepts we were playing with for the Mrs. Webb show was to do something like America House now. But that was such a different time—America House was the first craft gallery, you could say; it was also a bit like a shop—and obviously we have a shop already, which is very successful, and is really finely tuned to a contemporary public, and so I felt that overemphasizing Webb’s retail operation in distinction to her curatorial, organizational, and activities like the World Craft Council or Asilomar conference, all those things she did, or her educational activities, I thought that might throw it out of balance a bit. So you’ll definitely see a very strong representation of America House in the exhibition, but I don’t know that we’ll re-create America House for the present day. In some ways our store is that,

I guess, because it operates on the premise of supporting the makers whose work is sold there, and that’s really what Webb had in mind, too.

GO: *I’ve always sort of felt that there’s an East Coast bias to this world, but you have very strong ties to the West Coast and specifically to California. I’d be interested to know if you feel that New York stories, like the upcoming one, will still get the most play at the museum, or do you see craft as a world market now? Or do you look at the United States differently from the rest of the world?*

GA: Well, of course there are logistical considerations here because it’s always going to be less expensive to do things that are New York-based, and the next least expensive ones would be American things. But having said that, I actually think the biggest difference involved in the name change of the institution was not leaving behind the word “craft” but leaving behind the word “American.” American Craft Museum implied a national museum while I think Museum of Arts and Design implies a global mission, and we’re really trying to live up to that. So the most obvious thing to point to would be the



ED WATKINS PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST/YUJI ZENDOU PHOTO



show we're doing this fall curated by Lowery Sims—it's called *New Territories* and subtitled "Laboratories for Art, Craft and Design in Latin America" and is a kind of follow-up to her major project on Africa from a few years back. I think going forward we'll try to work at every scale of geography, so we'll look at cities, not just New York City—I'm very interested in Detroit, for example—and I'm certainly very interested in what's happening in Los Angeles, San Francisco, on the West Coast. We'll also be thinking about shows that traverse the entirety of the globe.

GO: *One thing you alluded to earlier is that you're not teaching any longer. Is that something that's just not going to be a possibility as the director of the museum, or do you see a new opportunity for a synergy between your institution and a learning institution?*

GA: Yeah, for sure. It's a little early to talk about it, but I'm actually in negotiations with an academic institution to develop a formal partnership. One thing I learned at the VandA was the power of research, not only to drive forward and enhance the vigor of the program but also, funnily enough, to attract funding, because there's a lot of foundation money that's earmarked specifically for high-quality research. Also, if you're talking to an individual donor, if you have a very sophisticated person sitting across from you and you can demonstrate the academic quality of what's happening at the museum, then that makes your case stronger. So I'm very much hoping to create not just one partnership but several with institutions around the country and even internationally. That's what I did in London, and I would definitely want to repeat that model here.

GO: *Well I think that that would be the best reason that we've brought you back to this country. As somebody who's had one of your students as an intern, I can say that it's a good thing to have people who've gone through your programs working on material.*

GA: And actually, there's nothing in an American museum like the VandA research department, which I've always found surprising, because it's a very, very good model. And to me, having a research function at the very heart of a museum just makes everything work better, letting the staff challenge themselves intellectually and becoming an anchor-point for external expertise.

La Ciudad Frondosa, an embroidery by Chiacchio and Giannone, Argentina, 2011–2012, will be part of the *New Territories: Laboratories for Design, Craft and Art in Latin America* exhibition at MAD in the fall.