

INSIDE PEOPLE



## Museum director wants to share fervor for her work

[By Robert L. Pincus]

SAN DIEGO - Back when she began her college education in the 1970s, Deborah Klochko was intent on becoming an artist. But, along the way, while earning her bachelor's and master's degree in photography, she fell in love with museum work and returned to grad school to get a second master's degree in museum education.

The 53-year-old director and her husband, architect Gary Singer, have made a happy transition from San Francisco to San Diego.

"I've found San Diego very welcoming, far more than the Bay Area," Klochko said.

Klochko grew up, from her middle-school years on, in a suburb of Rochester, N.Y. It was also in Rochester that her career took shape. During her graduate years at the Visual Arts Workshop, she first did museum education work at the venerable George Eastman House, with its vast photography collection.

"At that time, the workshop was such a dynamic place for photography," she says. "It was so important to me."

She organized "Picturing Eden," a broad-ranging exhibition of contemporary art that opens Sept. 15 at the San Diego Museum of Photographic Arts, for the Eastman House in 2006 - as one among several projects she did as director of Visual Literacy I.N.C. (Innovative New Concepts), the Oakland-based consulting firm she created in 2001 to "promote the reading, interpreting and understanding of photography."

"Picturing Eden" is the sort of show that she favors. It takes up a theme with broad

cultural implications. The dream of Eden or paradise is an enduring one and she's included 37 artists from six countries that obliquely or explicitly interpret the subject. The selections include straight-ahead black-and-white pictures, like Michael Kenna's landscapes, but also embrace faux antique tintypes of flora and fauna by Jayne Hinds Bidaut and digitally produced scenes in lush color by Ruud van Empel.

These same works appear in book form. They're accompanied by "a conversation," called "Visualizing Paradise," in which Klochko shares ideas with writer Rebecca Solnit, landscape architect Louis Mozingo and the director of the Smithsonian Photography Initiative, Merry Foresta, on this subject.

"'Picturing Eden' is about ideas, but it needed to be an exhibition as well as a book," says Klochko. "People need to engage with the actual work: Scale makes a difference, surface makes a difference."

### UNIVERSE OF MUSEUMS

Klochko has brought a considerable array of skills to the Museum of Photographic Arts. She's been a museum educator, at the International Museum of Photography/George Eastman House (1978-1980) and

the California Museum of Photography in Riverside (1985-1992). For four years beginning in April 1997, she directed the now-defunct Friends of Photography space in San Francisco.

After it closed in 2001, she created Visual Literary I.N.C., producing books and shows, advising the local Public Broadcasting System affiliate on a telecourse, "The Language of Photography," and establishing an oral history program about American photographers. But Klochko is happy to be back in the universe of museums again.

She acknowledges that it isn't easy to become the head of a museum whose founding director, Arthur Ollman, guided it for 23 years. Prior to 1983, when Ollman was appointed and the institution acquired a home in San Diego's Balboa Park, it had been a venue without walls under a different name, the Center for Photographic Arts.

While it had presented some stellar shows in the years before the museum had an address, Ollman transformed it into an institution with a considerable international reputation. Serving as director and curator, he assembled bellwether retrospectives for the likes of William Klein, Arnold Newman, Manuel Alvarez Bravo and Duane Michals and the formation of a collection of more than 9,000 pictures.

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"Following a director with as strong a personality as Arthur has its own challenges," says Klochko. "He created a fabulous museum and San Diego should be forever pleased and grateful for what he has done. I feel as if I'm helping the museum move to the next phase of its life."

Refining the existing concept of the permanent collection is one element of this new phase. Like many museums, MoPA has taken an encyclopedic focus, though specific works have been determined as much, if not more so, by gifts than acquisitions. As a young museum with a lean budget, funds for purchases have been scarce.

In preparation for the museum's 25th anniversary, which arrives in 2008, Klochko and curator Carol McCusker took a close look at MoPA's holdings with an eye toward a big exhibition from the collection to mark the moment. "The Photographer's Eye: Ways of Seeing From the Permanent Collection" will open Jan. 19.

Shaping this show was, Klochko says, "an opportunity to go on a treasure hunt. It made me look closely at our collection, to think about refining it. We can't compete with an institution like the Eastman House, so we have to get even smarter about what we acquire. And we decided to focus on two areas."

One part, in her view, would distinguish MoPA from other museums that amass photography. She is calling this the Pacific Rim Collection, and it will concentrate on works from North and South American photographers as well as those from Japan, China, and elsewhere in the region.

As before, the growth of the collection will depend on patrons more than acquisition funds, which are small.

Another part will become a kind of teaching collection. This will have a traditional

structure, touching on a cross-section of the major developments, movements and figures in the history of photography. There will now be a permanent educational gallery with changing installations from the collection.

"This isn't just for students," she says. "My experience is that adults enjoy this kind of presentation, too."

### WIDE PERSPECTIVE

Suda House, a widely respected photographer and teacher of photography on the faculty of Grossmont College in La Mesa, Calif., as well as a longtime champion of the museum, senses that education and outreach are big priorities for Klochko.

Listening to Klochko at one of the workshops the Museum of Photographic Arts does each year in conjunction with Grossmont, House was impressed by her presentation.

"I noticed the infusion of scholarly questions. She's worked so many places and I felt as if we were getting a global perspective."

Linda Moore, on the board of trustees, has observed the transition from Ollman to Klochko. (She oversaw the publication of a book chronicling Ollman's tenure last year, "Defining a Vision," and instigated the creation of a collection in his name.) And she takes note of Klochko's outreach to the community.

"To be memorable," says Moore, "museums have to move people and sometimes transform them. We need to engage the public in ways that create this kind of energy. Her background in education is increasing the existing program and I'm encouraged by the energy she's putting into the film program. I'd like to see more video work by artists in the museum, too."

In the contemporary arena, South African Gary Schneider, recipient of the 2005 Lou

Stoumen Prize - awarded by MoPA every two to three years - will be featured in a solo exhibition next year. The show, opening April 27, will highlight his integration of new technologies into photographic portraiture.

Lochko also has organized an exhibition, accompanied by a book, on Nancy Newhall, who was a painter, writer and curator as well as a photographer. Newhall, who died in 1974, was also the wife of Beaumont Newhall, the first curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art and the author of a pivotal "History of Photography."

"A Literacy of Images: Nancy Newhall and the Art of Photography" opens Sept. 20 and will tour. Klochko is serving as curator and has enlisted writers and photographic historians MaLin Wilson, Merry Foresta and Erin O'Toole.

The title of the Newhall exhibition, which echoes the name of her nonprofit Visual Literacy I.N.C., points to a particular passion of Klochko's: to provide people with the means for developing critical thinking about a world saturated by images.

Three to five years down the road, she's hoping to have established a Center for Visual Learning within the museum, which will offer fellowships for artists and guest curators to create projects with an eye toward furthering critical thinking about images from advertising, the media, the Internet and other sources as well as from the sphere of art.

She'll close her consulting firm, Visual Literacy I.N.C., after finishing a book to which she had already committed: a collection of X-ray photographs of marine life from the collection of the Smithsonian Institution, "Ichthyo: The Architecture of Fish." But she is also hoping that one of the projects she began in Oakland, oral histories of American photographers, can be continued under the guise of the planned center at the Museum of Photographic Arts.



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“This is about building a place for ideas, not about facilities,” Klochko asserts. “This

is what we should be about as a museum of photographic arts, helping people to

appreciate art. But even more it’s about how to think about our visual culture.”

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